College Student Development Theory: Traditional-age White Millennials

John A Gipson, Jr.

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/john_gipson/5/
Introduction

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. stated, “The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy” (as cited in Tutu, 2007, p. 46). The following student development theory is based on the belief that individuals entering the collegiate setting will face challenges and controversies that will encourage or discourage their personal development. Revised by Chickering and Reisser (1993), the Theory of Identity Development has been widely praised and utilized within higher education. While the majority of their theory can be applied to millennial students, nearly twenty years have passed since the publication of *Education and Identity* and major changes have taken place throughout K-12 education and in the descriptions of student characteristics. Therefore, new research and the development of a modified theory to fit millennial students are greatly needed in order for student affairs educators to best understand the current student population.

Throughout the work of Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, and Renn (2010), many theories are present which, when combined and modified, create a synthesized student development theory for white millennial students. Many theorists, such as Chickering and Perry, have been criticized for using a majority of white men within their original sample populations. However, Chickering and Perry later revisited their theories to include more diverse populations. Additionally, Rowe, Bennett, and Atkinson (1994) introduced the White Racial Consciousness Model to provide insight into how individuals develop a sense of being white. Despite years of acceptance and praise, some of these theories need to be altered in order to accurately fit the millennial student population. For this reason, multiple viewpoints have been synthesized to frame the College Student Development Theory of Traditional-Age White Millennials around
Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) theory using five portals; for the purpose of this theory, traditional-age is defined as 18-24 years old.

**Challenging Chickering**

Many descriptions of student characteristics have changed since Chickering and Reisser (1993) introduced their vector of Developing Competence. For instance, Sax (2003) reported that AP exams have “increased by a full third between 1977 and 2002” (p. 16) and that standardized testing shows an increase in academic competencies by millennial students. Additionally, Finn and Kanstoroom (2001) describe pre-collegiate educational standards as “considerably higher than minimum competence” (p. 135). The Michigan Merit Curriculum (MMC) enforces this statement by requiring students to complete four years of mathematics and English, along with three years of science and social studies, in order to graduate from high school. When comparing millennial students with earlier generations, Murray (1997) describes millennial students as “better prepared, more confident, and… more willing to do what it takes to succeed” (p. 42). These statements show that millennial students have developed academic competencies prior to entering the collegiate setting, which is a major component of Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) vector.

In addition, the United States Census Bureau (2011) shows that 41 percent of children between the ages of 12 and 17 participated in organized sports in 2009. Research by Johnston, Delva, and O’Malley (2007) states that 89.3 percent of white eighth grade students attend schools where physical education is required. Their research also shows that participation in team sports is significantly higher in school settings enrolling a majority of white students. Additionally, with an increase in AP exams and teachers moving away from traditional instruction through lecture, along with increasing communication through social networking,
students are able to gain interpersonal competence (Chickering & Reisser, 1993) prior to
enrollment in institutions of higher education. Thus, the majority of white millennial students
now experience Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) vector of Developing Competence prior to
entering college.

The Theory

Portals

This theory utilizes five portals to describe a general overview of the development
process in traditional-age white millennial students. Merriam-Webster (2011) defines a portal as
a door or entrance. This is a great definition of the five aspects of student development because
if each of the outer four portals is opened the central focus of the theory can be fully illuminated;
refer to appendix for a visual representation. Additionally, individuals may experience
development in multiple portals during a given time period. However, individuals must achieve
development in the first four portals before they can achieve the final portal, Personal
Competence.

Emotional Control

The first portal of this theory is titled Emotional Control. This portal is aligned with
Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) vector of Managing Emotions which includes feelings of
“anxiety, depression, anger, shame, and guilt, as well as more positive emotions such as caring,
optimism, and inspiration” (Evans, et al., 2010, p. 67). Controlling these feelings may be
difficult for millennial students due to being highly sheltered by parents (Howe & Strauss, 2003)
and possessing an “expectation of structure” (DeBard, 2004, p. 35).

Howe and Strauss (2003) describe millennial students as “demanding of a secure,
regulated environment” (p. 32). When students are left to interact with peers without the
presence of parental guidance and daily structure established by family members is removed, they must learn to control their emotions and settle conflicts using reasonable, non-violent, methods. However, these students may be experiencing Perry’s (1981) position of dualism, seeing a clear right-wrong answer, and find it difficult to reason with others when conflicts arise. Many students may also find compromising difficult because parental figures have been highly involved in making decisions and are routinely present to defend them when negative situations arise (Wilson, 2004).

Additionally, students experiencing Perry’s (1981) position of dualism may either trust or distrust student affairs educators because they view these individuals as authority figures. Students who trust authority figures may request that educators tell them how to complete their collegiate experience: examples include which major to enroll in, where to live, how to study, where to seek employment, etc. On the other hand, students who distrust authority figures may not seek the guidance of student affairs educators. Depending on the individual student, these situations may aid or obstruct the process of student development.

Individuals within this portal may also be experiencing one of Rowe et al.’s (1994) types of Unachieved White Racial Consciousness. While Broido (2004) states that millennial students possess “a much more expansive understanding of race” (p. 77), the collegiate experience may be the first time that some members of this population are immersed in an environment containing racial diversity. These students may have never before reflected on what it means to be white, or may have never seen the advantages that come with this racial identification. This population will fit one of the following types: Avoidant, Dependent, or Dissonant. According to Rowe et al. (1994), if an individual is Avoidant they will “ignore, minimize, or deny the existence or importance of the problematic issue” (p. 136). Dependent students will rely on the
opinions of others to shape their personal beliefs. Finally, Dissonant types will be uncertain about what is means to be white, resulting from new experiences. Once these students transition to Perry’s (1981) position of multiplicity, an ability to respect diverse viewpoints, they will progress through this portal and experience less difficulty in settling conflict.

*Developing Independence*

The portal of Developing Independence is aligned with Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) vector of Moving through Autonomy toward Interdependence. The theorists include emotional independence, instrumental independence, and developing autonomy through interdependence as key components of their vector, which I have also adopted. Throughout this portal, the primary concern of individuals is to become increasingly independent from parental figures. These students are beginning to pursue personal goals and will choose a major based on what they want to achieve in life, instead of what parents want for them. Additionally, students will think similarly to a graduate student in Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) study who stated, “… no longer was I looking to my parents for permission to do things. I was just telling them what I had decided to do” (p. 124).

In addition, millennial students want to increase financial independence from parental figures. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2011), 53.4 percent of white college students between the ages of 16 and 24 were members of the civilian labor force during October 2010. Additionally, Riggert, Boyle, Petrosko, Ash, and Rude-Parkins (2006) report that students work an average of 25 hours per week while enrolled in college courses. These statistics show that millennial students are attempting to achieve financial independence from parental figures. However, Astin (1984) illustrates that we, as educators, need to be aware of having a large
percentage of our student population employed to this extent because it will result in a lack of student involvement, which can delay the developmental process.

*Developing Mature Interpersonal Relationships*

While other portals within this theory closely resemble the work of Chickering and Reisser (1993), their description of this vector is seemingly perfect. For this reason, their vector has been fully incorporated within the theory. One of the characteristics individuals develop during this vector is a capacity for intimacy. Agreeing with Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) definition of relationships as “connections with others that have a profound impact on students’ lives” (p. 145) these bonds allow individuals to improve their lives, make connections that last throughout time, and provide the skills needed to develop successful relationships in the future. Additionally, trustworthy relationships allow students to openly display their feelings and express emotions they would not be comfortable sharing with most individuals. The theorists also state that when a relationship is “solid and consensual and based on equality and genuine caring, it becomes a springboard for further development as well as a source of deep fulfillment” (p. 172).

In addition, Chickering and Reisser (1993) state that a development of tolerance and appreciation of differences occur during their vector. Broido (2004) explains that a more diverse student body is being established at most universities due to an increase in the percentage of minority students enrolling in higher education. Although many students have the ability to experience this aspect of Developing Mature Interpersonal Relationships during high school, many white millennial students may have limited experience with diversity. Through interactions with individuals from various racial backgrounds, students will transition from holding no understanding of white racial consciousness to possessing an understanding of white
racial consciousness (Rowe et al., 1994). Students in Perry’s (1981) positions of multiplicity or relativism are likely to realize the differences established by race and may feel guilty due to recently developed understandings of the privileges associated with being white; some may attempt to challenge American culture and alter the status-quo.

*Identity Formulation*

Chickering and Reisser (1993) state that “Establishing identity certainly involves growing awareness of competencies, emotions and values, confidence in standing alone and bonding with others, and moving beyond intolerance toward openness and self-esteem” (p. 173). During their vector, the theorists believe that individuals develop comfort with body and appearance, comfort with gender and sexual orientation, sense of self in a social, historical, and cultural context, clarification of self-concept through roles and life-style, sense of self in response to feedback from valued others, self-acceptance and self-esteem, and stability and integration. While all of these concepts are important during identity formulation, students also develop a basic outline for how they will shape their lives following graduation. For example, these students begin to consider positions in which they hope to gain employment upon graduation or whether they will attend graduate school. Individuals within this portal also begin questioning established family values through acquired knowledge and supporting evidence, marking the beginning of a transition to Perry’s (1981) position of relativism.

One of the major components of Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) vector is the development of self-acceptance and self-esteem. According to the theorists, individuals progress in the development of self-acceptance and self-esteem by showing “greater self-confidence, faith in one’s abilities, feeling useful to others… It also involves a willingness to acknowledge weaknesses and hear constructive criticism” (p. 200). Such concepts are critical during this
portal because without accepting oneself for whom they have become, one cannot begin accurately to judge who they wish to become.

Individuals who move through this portal must also possess a type of achieved white racial consciousness. Individuals who possess these attitudes on race have developed a personal belief on racial issues through critical thinking and standing behind their decisions. Ideally, these individuals will possess reactive or integrative types of white racial consciousness. Reactive type individuals are aware of the privileges associated with being white and acknowledge that racism exists within society. According to Rowe et al. (1994) integrative type individuals hold a moral responsibility to challenge the existence of racism and value a “culturally pluralistic society” (p. 141).

**Personal Competence**

Differing from Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) description of competence, the central focus of this theory and the underlying reason a majority of traditional-age white millennial students enroll in higher education is the establishment of personal competence. This portal combines and expands upon aspects of the theorists’ vectors of Developing Purpose and Developing Integrity. The authors state that “Developing purpose entails an increasing ability to be intentional, to assess interests and options, to clarify goals, to make plans, and to persist despite obstacles” (p. 209). All of these aspects can be attributed to the process of student development for millennial students. However, DeBard (2004) states, “Parents of Millennials have organized their children’s lives to give direction” (p. 35). Thus, individuals within this portal understand the pressure to follow parental guidance but will now openly challenge their parents’ views through supporting evidence. This newly found voice marks a complete transition from Perry’s (1981) position of multiplicity into the position of relativism.
Individuals within this portal also develop an academic competence which prepares them for a career within their specific area of study. Individuals requiring licensing to attain select professions - such as teachers, nurses, or certified public accountants - will possess the ability to successfully complete the specific processes/exams within his or her chosen field. Additionally these individuals will expand earlier considerations of future professions and establish a commitment to gaining employment where they wish to construct a career.

Chickering and Reisser (1993) state that developing integrity involves three overlapping stages: humanizing values, personalizing values, and developing congruence. While traditional-age white millennial students continue to experience the development of these characteristics during their collegiate experience, most of the characteristics are fully developed following graduation. In order to pass through the portal of Personal Competence, individuals must transition from Perry’s (1981) position of relativism to demonstrate ethical development and establish a commitment to relativism. Perry (1981) states that when individuals demonstrate this position “one finds at last the elusive sense of ‘identity’ one has been searching for elsewhere” (p. 97). Due to the need to possess such high order thinking processes and establish long-standing commitments, not all individuals may achieve Personal Competence until after graduation.

Implications for Educators

Agreeing with the beliefs of Astin (1984), “The amount of student learning and personal development associated with any educational program is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement in that program” (p. 298). A student who establishes connections to campus will be aware of campus resources and the existence of programming to assist in their personal development. These students will engage in activities and gain an
understanding of individuals from diverse backgrounds. The experiences will assist in progress through Perry’s (1981) positions of cognitive and ethical development and Rowe et al.’s (1994) types of white racial consciousness. Knowing that student involvement is critical to the process of student development, specific programs and considerations student affairs educators should consider in order to assist student development are outlined.

**Housing**

This theory offers the assumption that most students experience Perry’s (1981) position of dualism early during their educational experience. To foster an atmosphere conducive to cognitive development, housing staff should utilize targeted programming devoted to the exposure and understanding of individuals possessing various opinions. Programming of this nature would assist students in progressing through Perry’s (1981) positions and offer support for the overall process of student development. Housing educators should also provide programming that allows individuals from various racial and ethnic backgrounds to interact through discussions on racial and cultural traditions in order to progress through Rowe et al.’s (1994) types and statuses of white racial consciousness.

**Career Services and Advising**

Academic advisors and career services personnel should encourage students to pursue areas of study where they express the greatest interest. These educators should be aware that millennial students may increasingly request plans created by educators in order to achieve success. These students may use statements similar to the following: What should my major be? What should I do? Where should I work? Educators should utilize these opportunities to foster student development and aid in the progression of students through the five portals. If educators capitalize on such experiences, students who frequently visit these individuals may progress
through the portals of student development more quickly than those who do not maintain frequent contact with professionals.

Campus Recreation

Campus recreation educators should utilize opportunities within intramural activities to promote an atmosphere of inclusion and equity to aid students in progressing through Rowe et al.’s (1994) types and statuses of white racial consciousness. Participation from diverse populations – culturally, racially, ethnically, and socio-economically – would allow opportunities for students to converse on various issues and understand the differing viewpoints of others, aiding in the progression through Perry’s (1981) positions. Johnston et al. (2007) state that “Racial / ethnic minorities… are at a higher than average risk of being overweight in adolescence, are getting less exercise due to their lower participation in school sports” (p. 195).

This statement shows that promoting inclusion within campus recreation would not only promote an atmosphere conducive to student development but would provide much needed opportunities for minority populations to become physically competent.

Faculty

Due to millennial students believing they are important and special (DeBard, 2004), educators should strive to connect with this population through the establishment of authentic relations. Creating such relationships will allow students to increase trust in faculty members and may lead to greater academic success. Additionally, faculty members should expect unprecedented levels of involvement from the parents and guardians of millennial students (Wilson, 2004). However, when difficult situations arise faculty must communicate with students instead of allowing parental figures to speak in their favor; this encourages the process of student development. Lastly, providing group work offers interactions among peers (Krause,
that are necessary to the student development process for those who choose to live off-campus.

**Conclusions**

President Gerald Ford once stated, “There are two kinds of education you get in this world. One you get from others, and another you give yourself” (Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library & Museum, 2011). Throughout the collegiate experience, individuals must utilize both types of education in order to progress through the five portals presented within this theory of student development. Although individuals are ultimately responsible for their own development, student affairs educators must capitalize on situations where student development may be fostered.

Despite not being empirically based, this theory is formed from the works of theorists who have been highly respected within the field of student affairs. However, there are still areas that need reviewing. For example, many statements on millennial students were derived from research that included diversity in participant demographics. Therefore, further research should be conducted in order to understand if aspects of this theory apply across broader student populations.

Additionally, new generations of individuals are constantly developing characteristics that differ from prior generations. One troubling example within *Education and Identity* is when one of Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) participants dated their research in stating, “From 1982 through 1986…” (p. 221). With student characteristics constantly changing, information collected over twenty years ago may no longer be valid. Based upon this assumption, further theoretical frameworks about the nature of student development are desirable within student
affairs. The context of the findings also serves to promote such considerations and future development on the topic by qualified professionals.
Appendix A

Student Development Theory:

Traditional-Age White Millennials

[Diagram showing Personal Competence, Emotional Control, Identity Formulation, Developing Independence, and Developing Mature Interpersonal Relationships]
References


