Using reflection to reframe theory to practice in student affairs

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CHAPTER EIGHT

USING REFLECTION TO REFRAME THEORY-TO-PRACTICE IN STUDENT AFFAIRS

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A group comprised primarily of senior student affairs administrators was recently engaged in a discussion about the role of scholarship in the profession. The dean of students from a large research university shared his belief that one of the major journals in student affairs had become "too theoretical" in recent years. In fact, he claimed to have found hardly any useful articles to guide his administrative work. One of the few faculty members participating in the conversation argued the exact opposite: she felt the journal focused too heavily on practice. Tension regarding the best direction in which to take the publication remained unresolved, as group members could not agree. Perhaps this dilemma could have been mediated via a "both-and" perspective. That is, the disagreement centered mostly on whether to focus more on theory or practice. The group instead might have asked themselves, "Why not both?" This example is in many ways reflective of the compartmentalization of theory and practice in student affairs administration.

In this chapter, we explore the undercurrents of the compartmentalization of theory and practice. We also provide a broad overview of theories commonly used in the profession and focus on using theory reflectively in practice. We conclude with a cross-case example of how theory and reflection can be introspectively used to inform and enhance sense making and action among student affairs administrators.
Explaining Theoretical Resistance: Five Assumptions to Consider

In their 1998 book, *Student Development in College: Theory, Research, and Practice*, Nancy J. Evans, Deanna S. Forney, and Florence Guido-DiBrizio made a compelling case for the use of theory in student affairs. They provided a comprehensive overview of theories that help explain student development in cognitive, affective, and behavioral domains. Other scholars have also highlighted the benefits associated with incorporating theory into work with students in general (Brown, 1972; Knoffkamp, Widick, and Parker, 1978; McEwen, 2003; Miller and Prince, 1976; Rodgers, 1990; and Strange, 1994) and diverse populations in particular (Harper and Quaye, 2008; Howard-Hamilton, 1997, 2003; Patton, McEwen, Rendon, and Howard-Hamilton, 2007; and Torres, Howard-Hamilton, and Cooper, 2003). As such, McEwen and Talbot (1998) noted, "the concept of student development and the related student development theories represent one of the hallmarks of the student affairs profession" (p. 133). Most student affairs graduate programs, particularly those that are in compliance with the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS), offer at least one course on student development theory.

Despite its well-noted importance in the student affairs profession, theory is often misunderstood in ways that limit its use in practice. While there are a variety of reasons why educators and administrators decide against incorporating theory into their work on college and university campuses, we find the following five misconceptions particularly noteworthy and problematic:

1. "Theory" was a course taught in graduate school. As mentioned earlier, most graduate programs in student affairs include at least one course in which theories are introduced. In many cases, emphasis is placed on understanding the underpinnings and structures of theories, usually one after another throughout the semester. Hence, many professionals graduate from student affairs programs having memorized Chickering and Reisser's (1993) seven vectors, for example, but lacking a clear understanding of how to employ this knowledge in practice. This problem is only exacerbated over time, as newcomers to the profession eventually become midlevel and senior professionals who forget the vectors, positions, stages, and statuses of theories learned long ago. More emphasis should be placed on socializing students in preparation programs to consciously use theory in practice. It is also important to offer continual learning about theory in student affairs divisions, as more than half of mid- and senior-level administrators do not have graduate degrees in student affairs (Harper and Kimbrough, 2005; and Winston and Greemer, 1997).
2. Theory is boring. Theory can lack excitement if thought of merely as something that was memorized for comprehensive exams in graduate school. However, there are many dimensions of theory that can be used to ignite deep and meaningful conversations among colleagues and students. When used as frameworks for sensemaking, theories can help clarify and untangle complex phenomena. For example, Harper, Harris, and Mmeje’s (2005) theory of male misbehavior provides insights for which judges officers in higher education have long searched. Men commit almost all of the violent behaviors and property destruction offenses on college campuses (Dannells, 1997). Harper and others’ theory elucidates the reasons for this and provides an instructive lens for the development of effective interventions to curb destructive behaviors among male undergraduates. Relying on theory to make sense of and respond to longstanding institutional problems such as this could be stimulating.

3. Practical experience supersedes theoretical insight. Years of experience are believed to render student affairs professionals more competent and credible in their roles. Consequently, those who have worked for several years usually command more respect than recent graduates from master’s degree programs. Although newcomers to the profession may be exposed to more recent technological, practical, and theoretical advancements in the profession, those who have worked longer (even in the same position, doing the exact same thing year after year) are typically deemed wiser. Although experience is important, so too is exposure to new frameworks that help explain student behaviors and improve organizational effectiveness. Much like the theory or practice debate, we argue here that practical experience and theoretical proficiency together are the best combination.

4. Classic theories are useless in contemporary contexts. Patton and others (2007) offered a critique of popular student affairs theories as a result of the reliance in their development on mostly male, predominantly white samples. Accepting such theories as universal truths and attempting to apply them to diverse cohorts of contemporary undergraduates without contemplation would be erroneous. Notwithstanding, there are various aspects of classic theories that remain applicable to groups beyond those from which they were originally derived. For instance, Stage 1 (basic trust versus mistrust) of Erik Erikson’s (1959) theory can still do much to explain why some students are unwilling to establish close personal relationships with peers and faculty, why the director of career services micromanages staff members, or why a vice president for student affairs struggles to delegate tasks to others. Also useful are additions and new developments to classic theories. McEwen, Roper, Bryant, and Langa (1990) offered nine dimensions of African American college students’ developmental experiences that had been previously overlooked in psychosocial theories. Their aim was
not to fully discredit or toss out existing theories, but instead to extend them. Thoughtful critique notwithstanding (Braxton, 2000) several aspects of Tinto’s (1975) theory of student departure deserve to be honored and are still useful in many ways.

5. Simply knowing theory ensures its use in practice. One of the biggest misconceptions is that theory automatically influences practice without much effort and consciousness. That is, once it is learned, an assumption is made that professionals will mindfully rely on it in their daily roles and responsibilities. No matter how well one has studied the Evans and others (1998) book or the latest theoretical breakthroughs published in student affairs journals, theory will not inform or enhance administrative action on its own.

An Overview of Theories That Inform Student Affairs Practice

A number of resources exist for readers interested in extensive syntheses of theories pertaining to college student development (Evans and others, 1998; McEwen, 2003; and Torres and others, 2003), campus environments (Strange, 2003; and Strange and Banning, 2001), retention and student departure (Bean, 2005; Braxton and Hirsch, 2005; Braxton, Hirsch, and McClendon, 2004; and Peltier, Laden, and Matranga, 1999), and organizations (Kezar, 2001; and Kuh, 2003). In this section, we provide a basic overview of theoretical perspectives related to college students and campus environments, and offer examples of how being conscious about them could prove useful in practice. Our coverage of theories is not intended to be exhaustive. Instead, we endeavor to illustrate how student affairs educators might use certain aspects of select theories in their work.

Psychosocial Development Theories

Psychosocial development theories attempt to explain or describe particular developmental, age-related tasks that focus on the resolution of qualitatively different crises or life moments that people experience. Strange and King (1990) explained that psychosocial theories are “cyclical periods of transition and stability, generally a function of chronological maturation, and offer opportunities for teachable moments when the learning tasks are personally relevant” (p. 15). Such theories highlight the development of external identities such as race, gender, and sexuality, and internal processes such as behavior, thoughts, and value systems. Moreover, these theories highlight the significant role of the environment in mediating the developmental process. Thus, development is not
only unique to the individual but also hangs in balance with the ways in which the individual relates to others and the surrounding environment.

Psychosocial development theories focus on the substance or "content" of development (Evans and others, 1998; Miller and Winstone, 1999). The content of development may include but is not limited to the construction of interpersonal or intimate relationships, selection of career interests or declaring a major, establishing a deeper understanding and definition of oneself beyond authoritative figures such as parents, and establishing a sense of confidence and autonomy to make decisions and express ones values through thought and action. According to Miller and Winstone, these "developmental tasks" represent "an interrelated set of behaviors and attitudes that one's culture specifies should be exhibited at approximately the same chronological time in life by a given age cohort in a designated environment context such as the higher education setting" (p. 104). In other words, development is a continuous, cumulative, and natural process comprised of developmental tasks that are often culture specific, age related, and qualitatively different in terms of how they are experienced (that is, how people think, behave, or feel as a result of the experience). Moreover, development rests within the individuals' ability to effectively resolve the uncomfortable and challenging nature of the tasks in increasingly complex and diverse ways. These resolutions are contingent on an individual's ability to master the challenges and opportunities presented in previous tasks.

Erikson's work (1959, 1963, 1968, 1980) is commonly credited as a significant contribution to the way that student affairs educators understand and use psychosocial development theories to inform practice. Hamrick, Evans, and Schuh (2002), Evans (2003), and others have noted that while Erikson did not focus specifically on the development of college students, nevertheless, his work is significant for student affairs educators. Moreover, later work focusing on development has been significantly influenced by Erikson's work.

Numerous other theories of psychosocial development have evolved, including those of Marcia (1966), Josselson (1991, 1996), and Chickering and Reiser (1993), to name a few. Each of these theories highlights the developmental process and in some cases the development of a particular identity within the context of the broader developmental process. Chickering and Reiser's seven vectors explain how college students learns, grows, and develops. The vectors denote a change in magnitude and direction and include developing competence, managing emotions, establishing identity, moving through autonomy toward interdependence, developing integrity, developing mature interpersonal relationships. Chickering and Reiser's vectors can be used in many ways to assist student affairs educators with a diverse student body. For example, Andrea, a first-year student, must resolve feelings of fear, anger, depression, and anxiety
that have emerged as a result of challenges she has faced in getting adjusted to a new campus environment and finding new friends. The work of Chickering and Reiser, specifically their articulation of the managing emotions vector, can be helpful to student affairs professionals in shaping their efforts to assist students like Andrea in understanding their emotions and in generating support programs that help those students. Understanding this vector might also be beneficial for student affairs educators when handling campus crises that result in violence, death, suicide, and loss of friends and loved ones.

Psychosocial theories also highlight the developmental process as it relates to social identities such as gender, sexual orientation, and race. The work of Cross (1991, 1995) and of Cass (1979) are examples of such theories. Cross's (1991, 1995) theory of psychological Nigrescence focuses on the development of a healthy Black identity and is among the first to specifically highlight the developmental experiences of people of color. Cross offers a five-stage model that describes the process of racial identity development among African Americans that includes: pre-encounter, encounter, immersion-emersion, internalization, and internalization commitment. It should be noted that Cross suggests that the fourth and fifth stages be collapsed into one until more research is done to support the existence of additional stages.

In explaining the process of Nigrescence, the term “race salience” is used to describe the degree of significance that race holds for individuals (Vandiver, 2001). High race salience indicates that race is central to one’s self-concept, while low race salience refers to those who have a sense of, yet attribute very little of their self-concept to, being African American (Cross and Phagen-Smith, 2001). This theory is particularly helpful in providing developmental support for African American students. For example, the first stage of the theory, “pre-encounter,” refers to individuals who demonstrate low race salience. They tend to relate their experiences with a mainstream, neutral, or pro-White identity, or they are opposed to African American culture and may assume an anti-Black stance. Student affairs educators would find this theory useful in working with an African American student at a predominantly White institution. For example, Brian, an African American male who comes to campus with low race salience, would likely be unprepared to deal with being labeled with a derogatory racial slur, especially if it represents his first conscious encounter with racism. Thus student affairs educators might intervene by offering recommendations to the student, such as reporting the incident, connecting the student with an African American mentor who has experience with racism and is willing to help the student process the experience, or encouraging the student to become involved in activities or academic courses that can shed light on the African American experience and the role of this identity in society. These types of activities can help the student to
gain a greater self-concept with regard to race and serve as a safe space to learn about African American culture and history in the American context.

Cognitive Development Theories

Cognitive development theories describe the varied approaches that individuals use to organize, think about, explain, and make meaning of life situations. Rodgers (1990) explained, “Cognitive developmental theories attempt to describe the increasing degrees of complexity with which individuals make meaning of their experiences with moral questions, questions of knowing and valuing, questions of faith, and questions of what is self and object” (p. 35). In addition, individuals may grapple with epistemological reasoning (Baxter Magolda, 1992) and the development of wisdom (Brown, 2004).

Cognitive development theories also describe how individuals transition toward increasingly complex ways of seeing the world and the assumptions that they use to understand the world. Simply stated, these theories attempt to explain “how” we think (Chickering and Reisser, 1993), which is somewhat different from psychosocial theories that explain “what” we think about life situations (Evans and others, 1998). As different and varied experiences emerge, individuals are challenged to think about their own viewpoints and their underlying assumptions, as well as how these viewpoints contradict or counter societal viewpoints. In doing so, cognitive dissonance occurs, pressing individuals to interpret and make meaning of these experiences.

Cognitive development theories suggest that development occurs in a sequential, predictable, hard-staged, and irreversible pattern. Thus, once individuals reach a certain point in their development, they rarely regress because development is viewed as cumulative and invariant. So an individual is not able to “unthink” a certain position, opinion, or decision, but instead may reinterpret or ascribe new meanings to these components in the cognitive development process. King (1990) shared three major assumptions to consider when examining cognitive development: 1) the meaning of experiences is cognitively constructed, 2) cognitive structures evolve, and 3) development occurs in interaction with the environment. She explains that at the heart of the process of interpreting different experiences, are “cognitive structures,” a set of connected assumptions that serve as an interpretive framework and represent the logic contained in the meaning making process. In most cognitive development theories, cognitive structures represent the stages that describe the process of progressing from simplistic to complex thinking. The cognitive structures do not remain stagnant. Instead, these structures, generated through previous experiences, buttress the creation of future structures. As individuals transition into adulthood, they use more evidence or information to construct
meaning. As such, foundational structures are deemed insufficient and must be revised to reflect more complex and advanced thinking. The changing or revising of cognitive structures does not exist in a vacuum. The amount of challenge and support (Sanford, 1967) offered in different environments plays a significant role in cognitive development. The interrelated assumptions used to generate cognitive structures change as individuals mature and interact with the world. Interactions within any given environment have the capacity to facilitate the necessary stimulation and challenge to move individuals toward greater cognitive complexity or to stifle development through the lack of challenge or the nonexistence of a supportive environment to address such challenges.

A number of cognitive theorists have offered perspectives on cognitive development including Perry (1999), Kohlberg (1976, 1984), Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, and Thoma (1999), King and Kitchener (1994), Kegan (1982, 1994), Fowler (2000), Parks (2000), and Brown (2004). While explaining each of these theories is beyond the scope of this chapter, it should be noted that the work of other theorists, including Gilligan (1982), Belenky and others (1986), and Baxter Magolda (1992), provide insights about gender differences in the cognitive development process.

All cognitive development theories can be used to inform student affairs practice. For example, Perry (1999), influenced by the work of Jean Piaget, offered a scheme of intellectual and ethical development comprised of nine positions that when condensed include dualism, multiplicity, relativism, and commitment. Dualistic thinkers use a dichotomous thought pattern, which consists of viewing ideas and experiences as black and white or right and wrong. Dualistic thinkers do not acknowledge “gray areas” and see everything as having concrete meaning. Evans and others (1998) stated, “Learning is essentially information exchange because knowledge is seen as quantitative (facts) and authorities (including people and books) are seen as having and dispensing the right answers. Dualism represents concrete meaning making and belief that all questions have an answer.”

Student affairs educators that have familiarity with this theory can use it, for example, to assist students in a residence hall learning community in moving beyond dualistic thinking toward more complex thinking. One intervention is to invite members of the floor to participate in a “hot topics” program in which they would offer their opinions and hear opposing viewpoints. With the proper facilitation (by a faculty member or student affairs educator), students could be challenged to think about how they respond to a particular topic, how they justify their stance, and how hearing additional information and viewpoints might enhance their thinking about the topic.

In terms of later theorists who found gender differences in the way that men and women develop cognitively, Belenky and others (1986) described five
epistemological perspectives, or ways of knowing, that were reflective of the women who participated in their longitudinal study. The perspectives include silence, received knowledge, subjective knowledge, procedural knowledge, and constructed knowledge. These perspectives closely resemble Perry's cognitive scheme but focus more on the unique voices of women.

One perspective that the authors describe is subjective knowledge. In this perspective, a shift occurs in how knowledge is viewed. The shift involves movement from trusting the knowledge of others to recognizing and trusting the knowledge that resides internally. Thus, women participate in the “act of choosing self over other” (Evans and others, 1998, p. 148) in how they think. An example of this perspective could be seen with Patricia, a student who has majored in chemistry, a male-dominated academic department at her institution. Up to this point, her professors have been men, who lack a true understanding of her unique experiences as a woman, particularly in this academic setting. Therefore, she may feel underappreciated, ignored, and invisible. A student affairs educator who is aware of this situation could create an undergraduate women's retreat that provides space for women students to share their experiences, how they think about the experiences, and how their views are shaped by the experiences. Through the retreat, the student from the chemistry department may feel empowered to do more self-examination of how she thinks and generate ways to maneuver through the chemistry program to be successful, such as taking a course in women's studies or using the resources at the women's center on campus for consultation.

Environmental Theories

Environmental theories explain the ways in which educational settings “attract, sustain, and satisfy students” (Strange and King, 1990). These theories focus on the manner in which the environment influences and shapes the experiences of those within them. According to Lewin's Interactionist Paradigm (1936), behavior is a function of the interaction between the person and the environment. Environmental theories focus less on development and more on individual patterns of behavior. Such theories explain the larger milieu and context in which behavior occurs and what behaviors individuals might exhibit. Strange and Banning (2001) identified four environmental perspectives to consider when working with college students: physical environments, organizational environments, constructed environments, and human aggregate environments. Physical environments comprise the tangible aspects such as buildings, the way particular environments are arranged (that is, classrooms and residence halls), and the
nonverbal messages that are communicated to individuals in the environment. Organizational perspectives describe the rules that are communicated through an environment. Constructed perspectives explain the lived reality of those within an environment based upon how these individuals construct this reality. Different individuals experience the same environment in different ways based upon their background and experiences.

**Human Aggregate Perspective**

The remainder of this section focuses on the human aggregate perspective, or the characteristics of the individuals who comprise the environment. The human aggregate perspective suggests that individuals and the environment are mutually influential in shaping one another (Strange and Banning, 2001).

The human aggregate perspective is comprised of typology theories, which focus more on predicting how individuals will act in a particular environment rather than the individuals’ developmental process. Chickering and Reisser (1993) stated that such theories “are not technically developmental theories, since they do not describe the hallmarks of development, the means of measuring it, or the ways to foster it” (p. 3). Typology theories explain not simply the behavior itself but how behavior might be exhibited. Such theories acknowledge that people have individual patterns or personal styles that influence their behavior and learning preferences. Typology theories represent the unique perspectives that each individual contributes to the environment.

Typology theories include the work of Holland (1973), Myers and Briggs (Myers, 1967; Myers and McCaulley, 1985), and Kolb (1984, 1985). Each theory can be related to educational and developmental interventions for students. For example, the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) examines perceptual, judging, and attitude preferences. When applied, the Indicator, based upon Jung’s (1971) personality theory, describes individual preferences using four dichotomized personality dimensions consisting of sensing or intuition, thinking or feeling, extraversion or introversion, and judgment or perception. The MBTI can serve as a valuable resource for student affairs educators. For example, through administering the instrument, a residence hall supervisor may find that the resident assistants working in the building have both extravert and introvert characteristics.

This dichotomy describes how individuals interact with those in the environment. Extraverts derive their energy externally, while introverts produce energy internally. Thus, residence life training should consist of different activities that cater to different styles. Small-group interactions may be more comfortable for introverts, whereas large-scale activities might be more comfortable for extraverts. Similarly, the MBTI could be used in the classroom, leadership training,
and career development because of its ability to help individuals assess their personality type and gain insight into how they process information and view the world.

**Other Bodies of Theory Relevant to Student Affairs**

Limits on the size of this chapter prohibit even a cursory review of other bodies of theory that might inform the professional practice of student affairs. Certainly a familiarity with the broad critical, postmodern, Afrocentric, feminist, indigenous, queer, or neo-Marxist theoretical frameworks can be valuable in helping student affairs professionals to interrogate the hidden curriculum of our field.

In addition, the following specific bodies of theory are often used to inform our professional work:

- **Student success theories** such as the Astin’s (1985) theory of involvement, Tinto’s (1975) theory of integration, or the work of Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering (1989) on mattering theory.
- **Organization theories**, including Senge’s (1990) work on learning organizations, Mintzberg’s (1979) work on organizational forms, or Bolman and Deal’s (1991) four organizational frames, and
- **Leadership theories**, for example Bass’s (1990) work on transformational leadership or Greenleaf’s (1977) model of servant leadership.

As previously stated, the overview offered in this section provides a glimpse of the theories that are often used to inform student affairs practice. We offered some examples of how these theories can be used to inform practice. However, we now turn our attention to the use of reflection to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

**Applying Theory to Practice: A Cross-Case Example**

“Student affairs practice without a theoretical base is not effective or efficient” (Evans and others, 1998, p. 19). Upcraft (1994) argued that theory is not well known among educators and administrators and is rarely integrated into practice. Those who have worked in the profession would likely agree that student affairs administrators are always “on the go” and deeply entrenched in a wide range of institutional responsibilities—indeed, they have much to balance. In
these moments, it is often difficult and unrealistic to always be diligent, explicit, intentional, and reflective about using theory to inform practice amidst more pressing day-to-day responsibilities. For example, “I used Chickering and Reisser’s vectors to guide my work with a student today” probably does not come to mind during the course of a busy workday. Upcraft (1993) added, “There is an underlying suspicion, usually felt by the researchers and theoreticians in our field, that our theories are not used enough by practitioners as they develop policy, make decisions, solve problems, deliver services and programs, manage budgets, and in general do their jobs” (p. 260). We strongly advocate an intentional and reflective integration of theory into student affairs administrative practice. In this section, we provide brief illustrative examples of how one Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) Student Center director at a large university and a vice president for student affairs on a small college campus exemplify theory-minded practice.

The LGBT Center Director

Despite ongoing outreach efforts, fewer and fewer students are using the LGBT Center as a resource. In fact, it appears that the same students hang out at the center and participate in its programs on a regular basis. Reportedly, there is a large population of LGBT and questioning students at the university who hold negative perceptions of the center and its staff. Many believe the center caters almost exclusively to certain “versions” of gay and lesbian persons, and the director is perceived to be especially discriminatory toward closeted students who prefer to keep their sexual orientations undisclosed. Also, racial and ethnic minority student engagement in the center is woefully low, as many have felt pressured to privilege their sexualities above other aspects of their identities. The director was recently given this feedback by the dean of students, the person to whom she directly reports, and told that she and her staff must either reconsider their approach to attract more students or risk having the current stand-alone unit merged into the multicultural resource center on campus. Many of the negative comments came as a surprise to the director, as she had erroneously concluded that her personal efforts and the ethos of the LGBT Center were inclusive.

After the meeting, the director began to reflect on the undercurrents of barriers to student engagement. She first examined herself and the ways in which she interacts with students, the assumptions with which she and her staff plan programs, and the biases and preferences she brought to her role. As a White woman who had long publicly identified as lesbian and directed an LGBT center for the previous five years, she realized for the first time that she had actually privileged students who were at the “identity pride” stage of Cass’s (1979) model of homosexual identity formation. Suddenly she recalled that some persons may never choose to engage in one of D’Augelli’s (1994) identity development processes,
“entering a lesbian/gay/bisexual community,” as they may not want to assume the sociopolitical risks of doing so or simply do not wish to affiliate as strongly. The challenge for her was to make the center less intimidating to students who were not at that particular place in their identity development, recognizing that some could benefit from the resources and support without engaging immediately in the LGBT community.

“The character of an environment is implicitly dependent on the typical characteristics of its members” (Moos, 1986, p. 286). To this end, Strange and Banning’s (2001) explanation of human aggregates was useful for making sense of why some LGBT students may have felt uncomfortable coming to the center. Specifically, if the “typical” people who hang out at the center act and behave in similar ways, characteristics are created that may not be appealing to LGBT students whose identities are positioned differently. The director also accessed the multiple dimensions of identities models offered by Jones and McEwen (2000) and Abes, Jones, and McEwen (2007) to better understand the low levels of engagement among racial and ethnic minority students. This enabled her to see how a Latina bisexual student may feel more allegiance to her ethnic community or how a Black lesbian may embrace her womanist identity more strongly (Constantine and Watt, 2002). These theories proved helpful in her reflection on issues, problems, and concerns with the center. She then began to think critically about why she and her staff approached their work in ways that were alienating to some students. Afterward, the director began to reflect on what she could do differently in the future to make the center more inviting and her own personal approach more appealing to students representing a range of sexual identities.

The Vice President for Student Affairs

The president of a small liberal arts college called an emergency meeting of her executive cabinet (all of the vice presidents) to strategically develop a response to the weeklong Black student protest on campus. At the beginning of the meeting, the president expressed confusion and frustration, as she could not understand the source of the students’ discontent. Instead of jumping in immediately to offer a set of explanatory possibilities, the vice president for student affairs first took a moment to engage colleagues seated around the table—all of whom were White—in a conversation about their privileged racial positions at the college. He asked them to imagine for a moment being one of only twenty-two total persons representing their own racial group. Explicitly drawing on Critical Race Theory (see Bell, 1989 Delgado and Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995; and Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso, 2001), he suggested why some Black students are compelled to challenge the oppressive institutional ethos and racial microaggressions with which they are often forced to contend.

Furthermore, this vice president shared his own personal viewpoint that being at the "immersion-emersion" stage of William E. Cross’s (1971, 1991,
1995) Theory of Psychological Negrescence is not bad. He explained that this stage is characterized by strong, positive feelings for the Black race as well as the exploration of ethnic history, knowledge about the oppression of Black people in America and elsewhere, and the collection of artifacts pertaining to Black culture. Although the Black students were protesting, the vice president for student affairs thought it was good that they were demanding racial justice on behalf of the Black student community on campus. Despite his efforts, the president and senior cabinet members still maintained their positions that the student protest was disruptive and unnecessary.

After the meeting, as the vice president for student affairs walked back to his office, he reflected on Tinto's (1975, 1993) concept of social and academic integration, as well as Rendon's (1994) Cultural Validation Model. He understood that Black students were feeling marginalized in the classroom and socially excluded from the activities offered outside the classroom and therefore were likely to depart prematurely if they were denied support. He was disappointed that his fellow cabinet members could not see or understand this. Notwithstanding, he felt that he had done a reasonably good job of at least attempting to expose the president and senior leaders to theoretical perspectives that explained Black student discontent on the campus. He took into account the environmental factors that complicated the acceptance of his argument and committed himself to trying a different approach in the next meeting regarding the protest. Furthermore, he recognized the value of his reflection and understood how it would compel him to become an agent and advocate for racial justice in future interactions with his colleagues.

Conclusion

There are a number of implications for using theory to inform student affairs practice. This chapter is a call to student affairs educators to be more active and conscious of the how theory can inform the work that they do and the services they provide by better helping them understand students they assist, the colleagues with whom they work, and the institutions at which they serve. This requires a certain degree of reflection, done alone or in the company of trusted others, as was the case with the president's executive cabinet at the small college. A balance between the two will likely bring forth new thinking about self and practice. We also contend that it is extremely important to challenge, problematize, and question assumptions that we hold and understand how such assumptions shape the profession and our professional practice.

This chapter served as a venue through which theory-to-practice in student affairs was promoted. However, more exploration of the relationship between
theory and practice and how we promote these entities in the profession (graduate school, professional development, staff training) is warranted. As Eraut (2003) surmised, “When theories are used, their meanings are shaped both by the context(s) in which they are acquired and by the context(s) in which they are used” (p. 61). We believe that theory and practice are not separate constructs, but have an interdependent connection, which can enhance our ability to successfully handle the rigors of student affairs work in an intentional manner.

References


