

Identity Development Among College Students

The college years are a time of tremendous growth for traditionally-aged college students. Psychosocial theorists examine the personal and interpersonal lives of individuals, focusing on the notion that personal development

begins at a very young age and continues for the duration of the life span. One famous psychosocial theorist is Arthur Chickering. Many educators highly regard his theory on identity development, which he originally presented in the 1960s, and later revised in collaboration with Linda Reisser in the 1990s.

Chickering's original theory on traditionally-aged college students has stood the test of time and is still very relevant today. The revisions actually broaden the scope of his original work to include all students, regardless of age.

Chickering proposes seven vectors of identity development. While students move through each vector, they are not rigidly sequential. Instead, while the vectors build upon one another, students can explore and revisit vectors at any time.

The Basics of Chickering's Seven Vectors

Vector 1: Developing Competence

This vector includes developing intellectual, physical and manual, and interpersonal competence. Individuals acquire skills that give them the ability to handle positive and negative situations that arise in life and develop a sense of confidence that comes from surviving those situations. Intellectually, individuals expand their interests and improve their skills in critical thinking and reflective judgment, objectively analyzing and drawing conclusions from data, generating questions and answers, and communicating proposals and opinions.

Vector 2: Managing Emotions

This vector includes developing the ability to recognize and accept emotions, as well as to appropriately express and control them. Age does not necessarily correlate with emotional maturity, as emotional baggage plays a role in development.

Vector 3: Moving Through Autonomy toward Interdependence

This vector includes developing increased emotional interdependence, which means achieving emotional and instrumental autonomy, while still relying on others for support. Individuals learn to rely less strongly on the reassurance, affection, or approval

from others, and instead incorporate others' views into their own developing self-concept.

Vector 4: Developing Mature Interpersonal Relationships

This vector includes the development of intercultural and interpersonal tolerance and appreciation of differences, as well as the capacity for healthy and lasting intimate relationships with partners and close friends. To sustain mature interpersonal relationships, individuals must be capable of trust, open and honest communication, and unconditional positive regard.

Vector 5: Establishing Identity

This vector includes the development of comfort with body, appearance, gender and sexual orientation. Additionally, individuals establish a sense of social and cultural heritage, a clear self-concept, a secure sense of self in light of feedback from significant others, self-acceptance and self-esteem, and personal stability and integration. When individuals achieve a stable and realistic self-image, challenges in ideas, concepts, and values and beliefs become less threatening.

Vector 6: Developing Purpose

This vector includes the development of clear educational and vocational goals, making lifestyle choices, and establishing strong interpersonal commitments. Individuals begin exploring questions such as, "What is really important in life?" and "What gives life meaning?"

Vector 7: Developing Integrity

This vector includes humanizing and personalizing values. Individuals progress from a rigid, moralistic way of thinking to the development of a more humanized value system in which the interests of others are balanced with one's own interests. A personalized value system is then established, in which core values are consciously affirmed and the benefits of others are acknowledged and respected. Most important is the development of congruence between values and behavior, which truly signifies integrity.

Source: Education and Identity by Arthur W. Chickering and Linda Reisser (1993)

Assisting with Development

Individuals are never too old for role models and mentors. Parents and other significant people in students' lives can continue to help students develop competencies in these areas well into adulthood by engaging them in conversations, providing an appropriate level of challenge and support, and role modeling specific skills and behaviors.