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The peer educator and the directing supervisor encounter a variety of challenges within a higher education organization. Both theory and examples of practice are provided to give a clear understanding of some of the issues they face.

Peer Educators in a Theoretical Context: Emerging Adults

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To understand the role and experience of a peer educator, it is imperative to examine the developmental issues and concerns associated with this stage of a student's life as well as the demands and challenges of a higher education community. For years, student affair professionals have used a breadth of theories to guide their efforts in developing young people. For the purposes of this chapter, we intend to focus on the developmental components of the theory known as emerging adulthood and how individuals engaged in emerging adulthood are challenged to provide peer education within the campus community (Arnett, 2000). Through the lens of emerging adulthood, we will share our own experiences with peer educators, and hope to bring to life some of the struggles facing both students and the professional staff supervising them.

Theoretical Context of Emerging Adulthood

Individuals participating in a peer education program on a college campus, just as any student, are typically entangled within many developmental tasks. One of our roles as student affairs professionals is to investigate, explore, and eventually evaluate theoretical models that best apply and describe the students that we are encountering and serving within these peer education programs (Evans and others, 2010). The first theory that focused on identity development was Erik Erikson (1950, 1968). He viewed identity foundation as the primary task of adolescence. Building on Erikson's ideas, Chickering in *Education and Identity* (1969; Chickering and Reisser, 1993) focused specifically on developmental issues facing students

New Directions for Student Services, no. 133, Spring 2011 © Wiley Periodicals, Inc.
Published online in Wiley Online Library (wileyonlinelibrary.com) • DOI: 10.1002/ss.380

in college. Other major foundational theories include Perry's work (1968) on the intellectual development of college students and Kohlberg's work (1976) on moral development. Student affairs professionals have built upon these theories to guide their practical work for several decades (Evans and others, 2010).

Jeffrey Arnett's (1998, 2000, 2001) theory of emerging adulthood expanded on Erikson's work and we have found it to be helpful in understanding our students and the challenges they encounter particularly as peer educators. Our goal is to describe Arnett's theory, present some of its limitations, but also share how it has contributed and informed our work with peer educators.

Arnett (1998, 2000, 2001) recognized how industrialized societies have created an opportunity for the transition from adolescence to adulthood to be extended over a long period, thus creating a new, unique, and distinct period in a young person's life that he termed emerging adulthood. He describes this population as consisting of individuals between the ages of 18 and 25 in industrialized cultures who have the opportunity to delay entry into the workforce. The three major areas of identity exploration for emerging adults are love, work, and worldviews.

While attending college, traditional-aged students typically move from the egocentrism of adolescence to the characteristics embraced in adulthood, such as responsibility for oneself, independence in financial matters, and autonomy in decision-making (Arnett, 1998, 2000, 2001). Entering college students often understand the world based on what they learned from their caretakers. As they separate from their parents emotionally and often geographically, they create a space to begin to decipher their own sense of self, which includes values, interests, and morality. There is much experimentation and assessment between who they were, where they came from, and how they will re-emerge. The experimentation is sometimes in the form of "risk-taking" behavior (Ravert, 2009).

Emerging adulthood is about changing one's identity to allow for freedom to move away from the family of origin's definition of the self (Arnett, 1998, 2000). This exploration is often a self-focused liberating experience as they are no longer controlled by parents as they once were in adolescence and have yet to feel the burdens of independence and responsibility of adulthood. This allows emerging adults an opportunity to challenge their family of origin and choose whether to embrace their new understanding of the world or return to familial values and beliefs.

Emerging adults do not consider themselves adolescents and they certainly do not want to be adults. Although they realize advantages associated with being an adult, they simultaneously recognize the disadvantages of leaving childhood (Arnett, 2007). Adulthood is viewed as dull and inhibiting with opportunities for exploration limited due to the loss of freedom both socially and geographically. There is urgency to this stage that some have described as a "quarter life crisis" (Arnett, 2007, p. 25), epitomized by

the phrase "you are only young once" (Ravert, 2009, p. 376). The clock is ticking, requiring one to "get it all in before turning 25 (Arnett, 2007). This period of self-discovery is clearly something different from adolescence and adulthood. Individuals possess tremendous optimism, a sense of possibilities, and empowerment to develop independence and responsibility in areas of academics, work, relationships, and worldviews (Arnett, 2007, 2000). It is an exciting time and for the most part individuals are highly optimistic despite their financial background. Nevertheless, emerging adulthood can also be accompanied by dread and worry.

Arnett's construction of emerging adulthood that he proposed in the *American Psychologist* in 1990 has become a phenomenon within the field of psychology with over 1,700 citations in professional works. The concept is also beginning to spill over into mainstream society (Henig, 2010). Arnett's concept of emerging adulthood is becoming more and more relevant for professionals in higher education who are working daily as educators, mentors, and supervisors of these young people immersed in this developmental task. As previously stated, we will use Arnett's concept of emerging adulthood to provide the groundwork for understanding the developmental issues for peer educators.

Limitations to Generalizing Emerging Adulthood

Arnett (1998, 2000, 2001) acknowledges that not all individuals will experience emerging adulthood for any number of reasons. It clearly does not apply to non-industrialized societies where one is expected to work at a young age. In addition, individuals may miss the experience of emerging adulthood if they move directly into the workforce after secondary education. Personality characteristics of a person can prevent an exploration of various opportunities, thus limiting their experiences. A lack of opportunity due to external factors such as the death of a parent can also prevent one from experiencing emerging adulthood. Arnett specifically identified social inequities as factors in preventing individuals from fully experiencing emerging adulthood. He recognizes the limitations in generalizing his work across cultures, ethnicities, and social class. Further research will be needed to study the impact of religion, sexuality, gender, and disabilities on this concept of emerging adulthood.

To begin to address these limitations, Arnett and Brody (2008) theoretically explored the impact of culture and ethnicity for African American emerging adults. This period is believed to be even more challenging for African Americans who are faced with negative stereotypes and assumptions that directly limit opportunities and exploration. It is also believed to be more challenging because African Americans are likely to be moving away from their ethnic communities to a less diverse environment in higher education. While transitioning to a white majority environment, there naturally comes the increasing likelihood that they will experience more

discrimination and prejudice. As discrimination and prejudice increase for minorities, the confidence and opportunities to explore diminish.

Consequently, it is important to recognize when working with diverse students who may face prejudice or discrimination that their ability to explore possibilities for themselves may be hindered by societal perceptions and stereotypes that permeate the campus community. In contrast, it is also important to recognize how privilege provides more opportunities and financial freedom. A major criticism of Arnett's theory is that a basic tenet of developmental theory is being violated, namely that he acknowledges that some people just do not experience this developmental stage. Lerner is cited as upholding this criticism because in classical stage theory, stages are sequential and necessary (Henig, 2010). Hopefully, as emerging adulthood continues to be researched there will be a better understanding of the impact of diversity, culture, ethnicity, social class, gender, religious beliefs, and sexuality on this developmental stage.

Applying Emerging Adulthood to Peer Educators

Despite its limitations, we have found Arnett's theory of emerging adulthood to be particularly relevant in our work with peer educators. Applying the theory of emerging adulthood to peer educators helps us to better understand their developmental struggles as well as our challenges as supervisors. While recognizing Arnett's limitations, the theory allows us to understand from one perspective what and why things may be happening (Evans and others, 2010). Emerging adulthood may not predict or determine outcomes; however, we feel that it does provide a better understanding of our peer educators, the psychological conflicts they encounter, and empathy for the process. Finally, using theory to understand behavior creates an opportunity for the supervisor to address issues with peer educators as learning moments rather than being punitive or permissive.

The Peer Educator Experience

Peer educators in the throes of emerging adulthood are likely to use their experiences in peer education as a vehicle to discover themselves. Some experiences may create identity crises and anxiety, while other experiences will provide a sense of optimism and empowerment. As Arnett described, peer educators are at times going to welcome the responsibilities of being a peer educator (an adult) while at other times they may reject adult-like tasks and long for feeling less responsibility. We will take a closer look at these experiences and discuss some of the challenges facing peer educators.

Identity Exploration. Peer educators play various roles that include teaching, mentoring, and creating and presenting workshops and programs. Some peer educators may feel congruence between these tasks and their

sense of self. This can provide valuable information about their interests and values and possibly vocational guidance for adulthood; they may view it as opportunities to expand their horizons. For others, they may feel confusion and frustration in their attempts to accomplish these tasks. For instance, mentoring may result in peer educators feeling separate from their cohort and possibly lead to feelings of loneliness and anxiety.

When peer educators learn and express their personal interests and define parts of their identity, they are likely to drift toward activities that mesh with their understanding of themselves. For instance, peer educators who have a more introverted personality style may prefer working one-on-one with individuals whereas others who hold a more extroverted personality style may gravitate to community programming initiatives. The time spent as a peer educator allows students opportunities to explore personal interests and take risks in the projects and tasks associated with peer education. All of these experiences, positive and negative, can provide peer educators with a greater understanding of themselves in areas of work and worldviews as they transition to adulthood.

Reconciling Multiple Roles. Peer educators are often developing different aspects of their identity simultaneously. For instance, a peer educator can also be a student, friend, or romantic partner, and even serve in other leadership roles within the community. Negotiating and integrating the demands of multiple roles into one identity can be especially challenging for emerging adults who hold uncertainty and ambivalence about the meaning of each role in their lives. They may simultaneously want and resist responsibility particularly if it affects their sense of freedom. As they embark on a particular role, they may be assessing their experiences and how the role fits into their sense of self. If their efforts are successful and consistent with their desire for diversity and exploration, they are likely to feel more confident in themselves and their place in the community. If their efforts are fruitless or too time-consuming, they may begin to question the role's relevancy and possibly begin to opt out of the responsibilities of that role despite having made a commitment to others.

Peer educators may also feel conflicted when the "family of origin" self conflicts with the new "emerging adult" identity. For example, a peer educator may develop a depression awareness program promoting the benefits of the counseling center, yet may resist counseling for his or her own depression due to having grown up in a family that values managing one's own problems. When these roles and values conflict, it can be challenging to hold and balance a consistent sense of self. As a result, the student may experience internal distress and possibly resistance to the goals and responsibilities of the peer program. At some point, individuals are likely to challenge their familial values versus the values they are learning from the peer education program. This can result in an internal transformation in their beliefs or a return to their original beliefs, both of which help individuals attain a more authentic adult self.

Not only can it be taxing for peer educators to integrate old and new values and roles within their identity, it can also be strenuous managing two seemingly similar leadership roles on campus. For example, peer educators working to reduce alcohol use may feel conflicted when they also hold a campus entertainment position that supports a campus activity that historically has had problematic alcohol incidences. They may feel disloyal to their campus entertainment role if they point out the high-risk alcohol behavior associated with it. On the other hand, they may feel defensive of the campus entertainment programs when the risk issues are raised. As a result, the peer educator can feel distress due to these conflicting roles and may reject some of the responsibilities of one position over the other. It is particularly difficult because a primary characteristic of emerging adulthood is risk-taking often in the form of increased substance use (Ravert, 2009).

Conflicting Messages and Competing Priorities. The multiple roles a peer educator holds on campus are also likely to involve multiple supervisors in different departments holding varied professional ranking, all establishing different boundaries and rules for each role. Students may question whom they report to and may prefer to work with one supervisor rather than another. For instance, peer educators assigned to support a particular residential hall may prefer for efficiency to deal with the director of residence rather than the peer educator supervisor. However, due to confidentiality and safety considerations the protocol requires the peer educators to only receive supervision directly from the peer educator supervisor. Disregarding the defined protocol and responsibilities of a peer educator may result in a number of unexpected and unintentional consequences and certainly infringes on the goals of the peer education program. However, fluid boundaries are to be expected in emerging adulthood as role taking is in flux and risk-taking in relationships is common.

Peer educators are also faced with managing different expectations from different supervisors, which can become even more convoluted when one supervisor supersedes the others. For example, peer educators may feel conflicted if the peer education supervisor insists confidentiality is maintained with all student contacts while the Dean of Students demands full disclosure including names and contents of the encounters. The peer educators are likely to feel conflicted as they are instructed on the one hand from their peer educator supervisor to maintain confidentiality, and on the other hand experience pressure by a campus authority figure to share the information. In the midst of this conflict, peer educators may feel confused, angry, worried, and ambivalent about themselves and their roles. They should seek guidance and direction. If this guidance and direction from supervisors is inconsistent, peer educators may be left feeling even more confused. Peer educators may then make their own decisions about how to proceed based on their personal values and opinions, which may result in further unforeseen and regrettable consequences.

Public Persona, Personal Needs. Negotiating personal limits within a peer educator role can be challenging, especially when personal boundary-setting is often ambiguous and undeveloped for emerging adults. For instance, peer educators may struggle with self-care as they attempt to balance multiple roles, expectations, and responsibilities. They may want and request personal help, though they may also be resistant to this guidance, especially if it is viewed as controlling or from a parent-like figure. Peer educators may even know how to teach others to care for themselves, but lack the ability or willingness to integrate self-care into their peer educator role and their own lives.

Reconciling Conflicting Values. Peer educators may struggle to accept the notion that their actions, both in and outside the program, can affect their ability to hold this position. The egocentrism of emerging adulthood may supersede the responsibility of their student leader role. For instance, peer educators working on a campus effort to reduce alcohol consumption may be held more accountable by the institution compared to other students should they be found violating alcohol policies. Another example that may affect their ability to be peer educators occurs when personal information is posted to a Web site, such as Facebook, that is inappropriate by community standards even if they feel comfortable with their behavior. The institution will hold community members accountable for their actions even if the behavior is occurring after "business hours." Peer educators as part of that community may struggle to recognize that even though the behavior is performed during their personal time, it may and probably will have consequences when they resume their peer educator roles.

In summary, the peer education program provides an opportunity for emerging adults to explore themselves and the community around them. As emerging adults, their sense of self is often fluid, and as peer educators they are being challenged to balance and integrate multiple parts of their identities. Peer educators may also be challenged by their own feelings and by ever-growing responsibilities as they venture towards adulthood. Ultimately, the goal for peer educators is to have opportunities that allow them to re-emerge with a greater understanding of themselves and their place in the world.

The Supervisor Experience in the Context of Higher Education

There are many challenges when supervising peer educators who are in the throes of emerging adulthood. The task is further complicated in the context of higher education because supervisors need to hold students accountable to adult expectations and responsibilities, even though peer educators may not quite see themselves as adults. The peer education supervisor is challenged to create a program framed by expectations and

responsibilities while providing a fluid atmosphere that enhances individual development.

The peer education supervisor is ultimately an educator tasked with teaching emerging adults many skills including but not limited to leadership, responsibility, and wellness. As a supervisor, one is likely to establish clear guidelines in this educational process, though as a compassionate educator these boundaries are going to demand flexibility as peer educators confide personal struggles in the hopes of receiving support, direction, and understanding. Creating a flexible atmosphere may allow peer educators to explore and experience challenges that stretch their own internal boundaries.

Although peer educators may at times welcome their supervisor's flexibility, at other times they may perceive the supervisor as having inequitable responses among the peer educators. The supervisor may have clear reasons for these distinctions, but due to privacy issues cannot share the reasoning with the other peer educators. Consequently, a delicate balance is often struck between flexibility and consistency when holding peer educators accountable for their responsibilities.

Responding to Differences. Creating a team and an orderly workflow among peer educators may be challenging as each individual is in their own self-focused process of emerging adulthood. Peer educators may respond to work demands in a variety of ways based on their own timelines, priorities, and work styles. Furthermore, there can be great variability in how individuals approach tasks. Some peer educators may be organized and systematic; others may procrastinate and wait to pull details together in the last few minutes.

Another factor that may affect the workflow is the style of supervision offered by the supervisor and the peer educators' response to this guidance. Some supervisors may allow their peer educators to dictate the scope of projects whereas other supervisors may prefer more control over the programs. The supervisor may experience conflict when overseeing peer educators who venture independently into new activities without allowing some oversight by the supervisor. On the other hand, the supervisor may also feel burdened by individuals who require significant direction and assistance with every assigned task. It is inevitable that at some point peer educators are going to be demanding as well as rejecting of their supervisor. It is hoped that the supervisor has developed a rapport with each peer educator to discuss these problems as they arise.

A Supervisor's Conflicting Roles. The supervisor of a peer education program often holds another position on campus, such as counselor, professor, or administrator. Integrating and negotiating dual roles can be a complex issue that requires fluidity and at other times clear boundaries. For instance, counselors typically maintain a non-disciplinary attitude toward their clients by offering unconditional support in a confidential manner, giving students the ability to discuss such taboo topics as underage

drinking. However, a counselor working in the role of peer education supervisor needs to embrace a different set of goals, approaches, and rules. More specifically, peer educators may blur the roles of supervisor and counselor by sharing personal information while expecting the boundaries of confidentiality to be maintained. Consequently, this creates a misunderstanding and a possible sense of betrayal if the supervisor needs to hold the peer educators accountable for their conduct. This situation can be challenging for the supervisor because holding the role of disciplinarian may be not only unfamiliar but also contradictory to his or her primary role on campus. Some of these problems can be eliminated by avoiding dual roles, such as not being the supervisor and counselor for the same student. It is hoped that these potential misunderstandings are anticipated and the supervisor is able to recast the misunderstanding in a positive light with the potential for growth and learning on the part of the peer educator.

The supervisor strives to help peer educators negotiate how to integrate their successes and failures as peer educators into their emerging adult self while balancing the needs and demands of the institution. The ultimate goal for a peer education supervisor is to create an effective group of students committed to their work as peer educators and to their own growth as emerging adults.

Concluding Thoughts

Throughout this chapter, we have explored the peer educators' process of emerging into adulthood. It is our contention that their participation in a peer education program provides them an opportunity to challenge their former beliefs and values and expand their sense of self by absorbing adult responsibilities and expectations associated with their peer educator role on campus. This evolution is riddled with challenges for both the peer educators and the supervisors who serve as guides through this transition into young adulthood. It is our belief that these challenges serve as catalysts to enhance the developmental process of emerging adulthood, which appears to be a distinctively unique stage for students in higher education.

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