



## CHAPTER ONE

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# AN INTRODUCTION TO STUDENT DEVELOPMENT THEORY

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College student development theory is a body of scholarship that guides student affairs and higher education practice. “College students” are individuals engaged in postsecondary learning experiences, typically those taking place in formal settings such as colleges, universities, and other higher education institutions; college students are also engaged in learning outside of institutions, when they are at work, doing service, studying abroad, or living in the community. “Development,” simply defined, is the process of becoming increasingly complex. In this chapter, we describe development in depth and then elaborate on developmental theories and processes throughout the book.

In social science research, where many student development theories originated, “theory is a unified, systematic causal *explanation* of a diverse range of social phenomena” (Schwandt, 2007, p. 292, emphasis in the original). It is a set of ideas that attempt to explain something in the social world. Theory may be relatively informal or simple, as in concepts that guide analysis or understanding, or it may be formal and have broad application to explain complex social phenomena (for example, cognitive development or racial identity development). Theory in student affairs practice is a useful tool that answers the question “Why?” (Jones & Abes, 2011) and is beneficial when it “helps explain a piece of the world to us” (Brookfield, 2005, p. 4). From this perspective, “theorizing is a form of meaning making, born of a desire to create explanations that impose conceptual order on reality” (p. 5). Some social scientists see theory as a guide for “ways to make decisions and think about how to interpret individuals, environments, and organizations” (Jones & Abes, 2011, p. 163), not to dictate a single explanation.

Most scientific traditions define theory as a tested and testable hypothesis proven often and over time. Over 20 years ago student development scholars Moore and Upcraft (1990) defined theory as a “[set] of definitions and statements specifying a relationship between concepts” (p. 179). They considered theory as definitive, highly structured, and based on deductive reasoning, causal connections, unitary understandings of truth, and separation between the researchers and researched.

Contemporary theorists frame theory as a way to “describe, explain, predict, influence outcomes, assess practice, and generate new knowledge and research” (Jones & Abes, 2011, p. 151). In short, theory framed from any worldview or paradigm can be a tool to enrich practitioners’ and scholars’ work with students. In Chapter Two, we discuss worldviews and paradigms and their relevance for student development theory and practice.

Early student development theorists Kniefkamp, Widick, and Parker (1978) grouped student development theories by “theory clusters” or “families” of theories (p. xi). Adding to their developmental nature, these theories include those that “focus on the individual, including social identities; those that examine students in the collegiate context such as student success and engagement, and learning; theories that explain the relationship of the campus environments to student development and success; and those focused on organizations and institutions of higher education” (Jones & Abes, 2011, p. 152). Renn and Reason (2013) pointed out that some student development theories derive from research on college students, while others have been adopted from academic fields including psychology, sociology, and human ecology. Regardless of their origin, all student development theories can influence practices and opportunities designed to promote student learning and growth (Renn & Reason).

Taking these multiple concepts into account, we define *student development theory* as a collection of theories related to college students that explain how they grow and develop holistically, with increased complexity, while enrolled in a postsecondary educational environment. In this book, we present and describe the growing number of student development theories and perspectives applied in higher education and student affairs. We highlight theories and perspectives that focus primarily on the individual student in a variety of collegiate contexts, and those we believe are most useful to and used by higher education and student affairs researchers and educators. Given the impracticality of creating one book with all of the theories that might possibly be of use to student affairs educators, we included what we believe is most applicable to the college student experience.

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## Defining Student Development Theory

This chapter provides an overview of the definitions of college student development and examines the origins and evolution of major student development theories created since the second half of the twentieth century. We begin with a discussion of definitions of student development and their historical roots and end with the ways in which student development theory is linked to student learning. Overall, we outline the underpinnings of this broad concept.

### Definitions of Student Development

*Student development* is a term used extensively in student affairs practice and research, yet it evokes many meanings even within the student affairs professional community. Professionals talk about “facilitating student development,” offices are titled “Student Development,” and graduate students study “student development theories.” Student development is almost universally viewed as a good thing, despite Parker’s (1974) critique of student affairs professionals for attaching vague and nonspecific meanings to this term. Parker suggested that for many, student development had become a catchphrase with no direct application to their work. What, then, does the term “student development” mean exactly?

In 1967, Sanford defined *development* as “the organization of increasing complexity” (p. 47). Sanford distinguished development from *change* (which refers only to an altered condition that may be positive or negative, progressive or regressive) and from *growth* (which refers to expansion but may be either favorable or unfavorable to overall functioning). He saw this positive growth process as one in which the individual becomes increasingly able to integrate and act on many different experiences and influences. Rodgers (1990) defined student development as “the ways that a student grows, progresses, or increases his or her developmental capabilities as a result of enrollment in an institution of higher education” (p. 27). More recently, Jones and Abes (2011) defined student development as “some kind of positive change [that] occurs in the student (e.g., cognitive complexity, self-awareness, racial identity, or engagement)” (p. 153).

Student development is also a philosophy that has guided student affairs practice and serves as the rationale for specific programs and services since the profession’s inception (Rodgers, 1990). Rodgers summed up this philosophy as “concern for the development of the whole person” (p. 27). A related

application of the term *student development* is programmatic in nature and is based on what student affairs professionals do to encourage learning and student growth (Rodgers, 1990). In a frequently quoted definition reflecting this perspective, researchers suggested that student development is “the application of human development concepts in postsecondary settings so that everyone involved can master increasingly complex developmental tasks, achieve self-direction, and become interdependent” (Miller & Prince, 1976, p. 3).

The student development literature we discuss in this book includes social identity, psychosocial, cognitive-structural, and integrative perspectives. These theories expand Sanford’s (1967) definition of *development* by identifying specific aspects of development and examining factors that influence its occurrence. Seeking parameters to identifying developmental theory, early researchers requested responses to four questions (Knelfelkamp et al., 1978) that are still useful to frame this dynamic process:

1. What interpersonal and intrapersonal changes occur while the student is in college?
2. What factors lead to this development?
3. What aspects of the college environment encourage or retard growth?
4. What developmental outcomes should we strive to achieve in college?

Student development theory provides the basis for higher education and student affairs practice designed to stimulate positive growth in students. Knowledge of student development theory enables higher education and student affairs professionals to identify and address student needs, design programs, develop policies, and create healthy college environments that encourage positive growth in students. While student development theories focus on intellectual growth and self-authorship as well as affective and behavioral changes among college students, they also encourage partnerships between student affairs educators and faculty. These partnerships have the potential to enhance student learning and maximize positive student outcomes in and out of the classroom.

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## A Brief History of the Student Development Movement

In this section we describe how the student development concept evolved and how institutions, researchers, and organizations responded to the need for more intentional efforts to support students in college. We begin by discussing

the vocational guidance movement of the 1920s and describe the trajectory of student development and its relevance to the student affairs field through the 1950s.

## Historical Roots of Student Development Theory

Early in the twentieth century, the relevance to the collegiate environment of the newly organized disciplines of psychology and sociology became apparent. Whereas theologians had previously espoused fostering Christian moral character as a goal for eighteenth- and nineteenth-century educators, psychological theorists such as Freud, Jung, and later Skinner examined human behavior through a different lens (Upcraft & Moore, 1990). As the scientific study of human development evolved, the academy responded by hiring student personnel workers who were viewed as human development specialists (Nuss, 2003). Focus on vocational guidance came first; however, the tumultuous events of the mid-twentieth century prompted significant changes in the student personnel profession and how the profession viewed student development. Events that influenced and contributed to a renewed focus on students included an embryonic student affairs field, the psychology of individual differences, and the need for institutions, particularly during the Great Depression of the 1930s, to place students in the world of work (Nuss, 2003; Rhatigan, 2000).

## The 1920s Guidance Movement

In the 1920s, the vocational guidance movement began in earnest as colleges and universities graduated students who increasingly sought occupational security in business and industry. Credited with initiating the vocational guidance movement (Rhatigan, 2000), Frank Parsons (1909) was the first to articulate a “match” between personal characteristics and particular occupations to determine the “best fit” for individuals in the work environment. For the next forty years, vocational guidance in higher education (and elsewhere) rested on this premise. Students in the early 1920s took more interest in vocational preparation than in developing themselves in a holistic way (Arbuckle, 1953). They sought practical knowledge to propel them into the world of work. At the same time, higher education and industry joined to create new knowledge and train new workers. In reaction to student demand for work preparation and industry demand for applied research, critics who believed economic ties between industry and higher education had to be severed in order to preserve academic freedom and integrity sounded

an alarm (Veblen, 1918/1946). Pragmatic philosophers, who asserted that optimal learning occurs when students' rational and emotional selves are integrated (see Carpenter, 1996; Rhatigan, 2000), alerted educators to the need to make education more than just vocational preparation. Combined, the critics and philosophers created a moral imperative for higher education to address students' multidimensional needs rather than focusing exclusively on vocational preparation.

### **The Student Personnel Point of View: 1937 and 1949**

In 1925, representatives from fourteen higher education institutions met to discuss vocational guidance problems. World War I was over, and increased enrollments left educators scrambling for ways to evaluate students and their needs. Educators and researchers developed several specialized assessment tools, such as personality rating scales, to examine students' ability and performance (American Council on Education, 1937/1994a). The culmination of these efforts was the American Council on Education's 1937 statement, the "Student Personnel Point of View" (SPPV). This landmark report recognized that educators must guide the "whole student" to reach their potential and contribute to society's betterment. In short, the statement was a reminder to the higher education community that the personal and professional development of students was (and remains) a worthy and noble goal. In 1949, the American Council on Education (1949/1994b) revised the 1937 SPPV statement to include an expanded delineation of the objectives and goals of student affairs administration. Returning to the late nineteenth-century focus on the psychology of individual differences, the document called for faculty, administrators, and student personnel workers to encourage the development of students, recognize their "individual differences in backgrounds, abilities, interests and goals" (p. 110), and give more attention to democratic processes and socially responsible graduates.

### **Formal Statements about Student Development**

In the late 1960s and 1970s, professional associations, such as the Council of Student Personnel Associations (COSPA) and the American College Personnel Association (ACPA), and private groups, such as the Hazen Foundation, began to reconceptualize the role and mission of student affairs (see Evans, 2001). The Hazen Foundation created the Committee on the Student in Higher Education (1968), which encouraged colleges and universities to "assume responsibility for the human development of [their] students" (p. 5). At the same time, Tomorrow's Higher Education Project (T.H.E.), initiated

by ACPA, explored the viability of student development as a philosophy of the profession (Brown, 1972) and specifically examined the student affairs professional “commitment to student development—the theories of human development applied to the postsecondary education setting—as a guiding theory, and the continued attempt to ensure that the development of the whole student was an institutional priority” (Garland & Grace, 1993, p. 6).

In his influential monograph *Student Development in Tomorrow’s Higher Education (The T.H.E. project)—A Return to the Academy*, Brown (1972) challenged college administrators and student affairs professionals to “hold up the mirror” to each other in order to confront the incongruities between the stated goals of higher education and what was happening to students. The project questioned whether student affairs professionals should be the only ones on campus concerned about student development and, more important, whether student development can be nurtured without the support and influence of those in the academic domain. A forerunner of the Student Learning Imperative (ACPA, 1996) and *Learning Reconsidered* (Keeling, 2004), the T.H.E. project recommended that student affairs educators increasingly emphasize academic outcomes and teaching-learning experiences, reorganize student affairs offices and functions, be accountable by conducting outcomes assessments, and develop new sets of competencies.

Soon after the publication of *Tomorrow’s Higher Education*, the Council of Student Personnel Associations (1975/1994) sought to define the role of the student development specialist and close the gap between theory and practice in the field. Miller and Prince (1976) carried the concept one step closer to implementation by highlighting the developmental tasks of college students and suggesting program options to help students reach their developmental goals. In later efforts to seek empirical evidence of the student development concept, researchers created instruments that focused on measuring student development outcomes (Winston, Miller, & Prince, 1979) and assessing the effect of the institutional environment on students (Pace, 1984). These statements of philosophy, along with the early research, provided impetus for the student affairs field to redefine itself in ways that helped professionals meet the challenges of intentional and holistic growth for increasingly diverse student populations.

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## The Evolution of Student Development Theory

In this section we describe the evolution of student development theory as a body of knowledge. We map its contours as it emerged as an area of inquiry and practice, from the 1960s through the early twenty-first century. It is important

to note that while this presentation follows chronological introduction of theories, we avoid designating any set of theories as “foundational”—a term that implies other theories may be derivative or less essential to good student affairs educational practice. That said, we do believe that it is important for professionals to understand the intellectual history of a field and therefore it is wise to know how the contemporary body of student development theory evolved from its beginning.

### Early College Student Development Theories: Through the 1970s

The 1960s saw the beginning of significant changes in student affairs and higher education as the country faced nearly a decade of social turmoil brought on by the Vietnam War and the civil rights and women’s movements. The student population no longer consisted primarily of upper- and upper-middle-class men. Women, veterans, and students of color from all social class backgrounds enrolled in college in increasing numbers. Student affairs administrators sought information about the needs and perspectives of these diverse college students and turned first to psychologists (for example, Erikson, 1950, 1968; Piaget, 1952) for information about human development that would help them understand the students with whom they were working. Social psychologists and sociologists, such as Kurt Lewin (1936), contributed knowledge about group dynamics and the effect of the environment on human interaction.

In time, theorists began focusing specifically on the experiences of students in college. Nevitt Sanford’s (1967) insights about the process of development (see Chapter Two) provided an enduring perspective on student development as a function of cycles of differentiation and integration and of the need to balance adequate challenge with adequate support for student development. Douglas Heath (1968) and Roy Heath (1964) each focused on maturation in college students. Sociologists Kenneth Feldman and Theodore Newcomb (1969) delineated the impact of peer group influence on individual students, including helping students accomplish family independence, facilitating the institution’s intellectual goals, offering emotional support and meeting needs not met by faculty, and so on. Their book, *The Impact of College on Students*, marked a watershed in the emergence of scholarship on college students, their environments, and their development.

In the mid-twentieth century, Erik Erikson (1959/1980) conducted groundbreaking research on adolescent identity. Because the vast majority of college students in that era were in their late adolescent years, the application of this work to a college student population was sensible. Building on Erikson’s



(1959/1980) ideas about identity development, Arthur Chickering focused specifically on developmental issues facing college students. Chickering's book *Education and Identity* (1969) quickly became a mainstay for professionals interested in student development and in psychosocial development in particular. Around the same time and also working within the psychosocial tradition, Marcia (1966) used Erikson's (1959/1980) ideas as a foundation for his research to investigate identity development in adolescence. In 1968, William Perry introduced a cognitive-structural theory of intellectual and ethical development of college students, one of the first to take hold extensively in student affairs practice. Lawrence Kohlberg's (1969, 1976) theory of moral reasoning, built on Piaget's (1932/1977) study of moral development in children, also gained popularity in student affairs. For some time, student development professionals based their practice largely on these theories (of Marcia, Chickering, Perry, Kohlberg). We discuss and critique these theories, which are still frequently used in student affairs, in Chapters Thirteen, Fourteen, and Fifteen.

In the 1970s, student affairs educators began to recognize and acknowledge the vast limitations of the early theories in addressing diverse experiences of gender, race, and ethnicity in higher education. Basing their conclusions on homogenous populations (comprising predominantly white men at private colleges), Chickering, Marcia, Perry, and Kohlberg made important contributions to the nascent understanding of college student development, but their theories failed to account adequately for the experiences of students of color and of women students of all backgrounds. Scholars and practitioners turned to psychological and sociological models of racial identity development such as Atkinson, Morten, and Sue's (1979) *Minority Identity Development* model and Cross's (1971) explanation of Black identity development.

Recognizing that development does not happen in a vacuum, counseling psychologists James Banning and Leland Kaiser (1974) introduced a campus ecology model that Banning (1978) later expanded into a monograph. This approach was popularized by work and publications of the Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education (WICHE) and its associates (see Aulepp & Delworth, 1976). Campus ecology focused on the interaction of the student and the campus setting (Banning, 1978), the principles of person-environment interaction that undergird applications of theory to practice.

While not developmental in that they do not describe progression from less to more complex ways of being, a number of typology theories with implications for student learning and career development gained popularity in the 1970s. Building on the work of Carl Jung (1923/1971), Myers (1980) explored differences in personality type. Student affairs educators, particularly those

who worked in the area of career development, also found helpful Holland's (1966, 1973) theory of vocational choice (see Chapter Two).

### **Building on Psychosocial and Cognitive-Structural Theories: 1980s–1990s**

The 1980s and 1990s saw the introduction of a number of theories that built on earlier psychosocial and cognitive-structural theories, with a continuing emphasis on addressing the experiences and development of increasingly diverse populations of college students. Ruth Ellen Josselson (1987a, 1996) extended Marcia's work specifically to women to understand their identity development. In 1993, to incorporate new research findings related to the order and sequence of student identity development, Chickering collaborated with Linda Reisser to revise his book *Education and Identity*. In Chapter Thirteen we highlight the research of Erikson, Marcia, Josselson, and Chickering and his later revisions with Reisser.

Basing their work on twenty-five years of research, James Rest and his colleagues introduced a neo-Kohlbergian theory of moral development (Rest, Narvaez, Thoma, & Bebeau, 2000) that is less rigid and more concrete than Kohlberg's (1976). Carol Gilligan (1982/1993) identified care-based rationales for moral decision making that also illuminated the processes of moral development. We discuss these moral development theories and subsequent elaborations of them in Chapter Fifteen.

Several theorists sought to expand Perry's cognitive structural theory. Suggesting that Perry had confused intellectual and psychosocial development in his final stages, King and Kitchener (1994) examined cognitive development beyond relativism, a process they labeled reflective judgment. Also building on Perry's theory, Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) were the first researchers to investigate the intellectual development of women apart from men. Marcia Baxter Magolda extended the work of Perry (1968) and Belenky and her colleagues (1986) by including both men and women in a longitudinal study of the epistemological development of individuals whom she originally interviewed when they were students at Miami University (Baxter Magolda, 1992). These theories of intellectual development have each, in their own way, made a significant contribution to understanding student development, and we discuss them in more detail in Chapter Fourteen.

### **Social Identity Theories: 1990s to Present**

As the United States becomes more diverse and students from different backgrounds enter higher education, understanding them is increasingly important, and theories focusing on social identities have become a mainstay in the

student development literature. These theories are grounded in the socio-historical context of the United States, in which some groups have privilege and some groups are oppressed. Collectively, social identity theories examine the development of both dominant and nondominant identities (McEwen, 2003a). While these identity models focus on the process of self-definition, many of them also examine how individuals move through stages of increasing cognitive complexity with regard to their self-identification (Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009). In addition to bringing in theories from outside higher education, student development researchers draw on psychology, sociology, social psychology, and human ecology, among other disciplines, to create models for college student identity development. In Chapter Four we provide an overview of the context and processes of social identity development.

Psychosocial identity development models address, among others, identities related to race (e.g., Cross, 1991; Gallegos & Ferdman, 2012; Hardiman & Keehn, 2012; Jackson, 2001; Kim, 2012), ethnicity (Choney, Berryhill-Paapke, & Robbins, 1995; Phinney, 1990), sexual orientation (Dillon, Worthington, & Moradi, 2011; Fassinger, 1998; Worthington, Savoy, Dillon, & Vernaglia, 2002), and gender (Bilodeau, 2005; Bussey, 2011). Models may be stage-based, describing development “through progressive, linear stages or statuses that lead to an end point in which identities are internalized, synthesized, and permanent” (Torres et al., 2009, p. 582). Or they may describe a nonlinear array of identity patterns, statuses, or stopping points, focusing on the influences of local features and systemic structures that privilege some identities over others. In Chapters Four through Twelve we present models that describe several areas of social identity in college students.

## **Integrative Approaches to Psychosocial, Cognitive, and Affective Development**

Although early student development proponents wrote that attempting to design one “comprehensive model of student development” (Knefelkamp, Widick, & Parker, 1978, p. xi) was futile, contemporary theorists have nevertheless made great strides in that direction. They argue that it is not possible to separate cognitive and affective aspects of development, and they explore both cognitive and psychosocial dimensions of identity and how these factors are interwoven throughout life. They examine how components of social identity (for example, ethnicity, race, gender, sexual, religious, and so on) integrate to create a whole. For example, student development theorists have adapted the work of Robert Kegan (1982, 1994), who introduced a life span model of development that takes into account affective, interpersonal, and cognitive processes. Kegan (1982) focused on the evolution of the self and how individuals

make sense of their world, particularly their relationships with others. An important outcome of development that Kegan identified is self-authorship—“the internal capacity to define one’s beliefs, identity, and social relations” (Baxter Magolda, 2008, p. 269). Following her former students into their adult lives, Baxter Magolda (1999a, 2001, 2007) used Kegan’s concept of self-authorship to explain the shift she identified in young adulthood from an identity shaped by external forces and others’ viewpoints to an internal identity created by individuals themselves. We discuss self-authorship in Chapter Sixteen.

### Connecting Student Development and Learning Theory

Student affairs educators do not work in isolation from the core missions of higher education, and there is important work under way that links student development to learning. For example, situated cognition, also called contextual learning (Merriam & Bierema, 2014), transformational learning (Fried & Associates, 2012; Mezirow, 2000), critical and postmodern perspectives (Merriam, 2008; Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007), disciplinary perspectives (Donald, 2002), and cultural frames (Chávez & Longerbeam, in press) are relevant, as they provide a wide range of views to examine how students learn, their frame of reference, and what they gain through new knowledge both in and out of the classroom. Additionally, most of these theories and perspectives on learning advocate for new ways of teaching to achieve optimal student learning for all students. Approaches such as the Learning Partnerships Model (Baxter Magolda, 2004b) make explicit links between student development theories (in this case, self-authorship) and applications in curricular and co-curricular settings.

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## Conclusion

It should be clear by now that the development of the whole student is more complex than one theory or even a cluster of theories can explain. The establishment in a relatively short period of time of a robust literature on student development underscores this point. The sheer volume of theoretical literature currently being produced is daunting even for scholars in the field. New approaches and the complexity of perspectives in use provide a strong foundation for understanding and working with today’s diverse college-going

population. Learning student development theory and learning to apply it are challenging but worthwhile goals for postsecondary educators. It is incumbent upon higher education and student affairs educators to use theory to inform not only practice but also larger public discourse on the uses and purposes of higher education in the twenty-first century. Development of the whole person is a critical outcome even as collegiate students change at such a rapid pace.

Student development theory now incorporates a half-century of research and professional practice with college students. Just as Knefelkamp and colleagues (1978) parsed the field into clusters or families, we do so in this book. Student development includes theories of social identities (for example, race, ethnicity, sexual identity, gender, religion, ability, social class), psychosocial identity development, cognitive/epistemological development, moral development, and holistic self-authorship. The categories are not mutually exclusive; they overlap in the lived experience of college students, as for example in the ways that increased complexity in ways of thinking (cognitive) leads to increased complexity in ways of understanding moral dilemmas. As we discuss in Chapter Two, student development theories are informed by worldviews and supported by models that help explain the processes through which development occurs.

In this chapter we have presented a brief history and a more or less chronological elaboration of the emergence and consolidation of the body of student development theories. We noted at the outset of the overview that we are cautious about presenting some theories as foundational and later ones as derivative; we believe that doing so risks establishing a fixed canon of theory, or creating the perception that the first theories—often those based on homogenous populations of students from privileged groups—are unquestionable and everything else is secondary, less important, “extra,” or optional. We therefore organized this volume to include—after this introduction and the next chapter on paradigms or worldviews—first theories of social identities, then Eriksonian psychosocial theories, and then cognitive/epistemological models. Self-authorship theory brings the pieces together at the end of the book, before we discuss applying theory to practice. Locating students’ social identities early reminds readers that students—and student affairs educators—bring their identities with them into every campus context. Of course it is possible to use the book in a different order from the one we present, and we encourage readers to undertake topics in the order they choose after reading about paradigms and worldviews that shape student development theory and student affairs practice.

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## Discussion Questions

1. Describe what theory is and create one or two metaphors you would use to help you and others understand the concept.
2. What is student development theory?
3. Name some of the early scholars of the student development idea. What concepts did they contribute to the literature?
4. What are the four questions that frame student development theory, and how are they useful today?
5. Give a brief summary of the student development movement and the evolution of developmental theory. Identify significant events in each era that may have shaped how educators thought about student development.
6. Identify and outline the major contributions of the early documents related to college students.
7. Draw representations or metaphors of social identity and integrative student development theories. How do these representations and metaphors help you better understand their relation to student development?
8. How are student development and student learning connected? How do they differ? Give examples.
9. What about student development theory do you most want to learn? What approaches will you use to facilitate your learning?