

2014 Convention Program Summaries

For those of you who either couldn't make it to the annual convention or attend every workshop we asked presenters to share summaries of their programs in the newsletter.

Thank you to those of you who allowed us to include these in our newsletter!

Emerging Adults Theory and Identity Development

Diane J. Wolter, Ph.D.



Student Affairs professionals use development theory to guide their programs and services, and the development of identity is integral to the college student experience. Those involved with career development need to be well versed in the theoretical models of college student identity development. This presentation explored Arnett's emerging adults theory in the context of more established theories. It also presented data from a study of two groups of first year students at a regional university. One group consisted of bioscience students who intended to pursue graduate or professional degrees, the other of students who had neither a major nor career plans. The study looked at the applicability of Arnett's emerging adults model to these students in their different approaches to identity development. The presentation opened with an introduction of the emerging adults theoretical model for those unfamiliar with Arnett's work. It placed emerging adults in the context of other developmental theories, then touched on some new publications in the field.

Numerous models exist for describing the multiple components of student development; this presentation focused specifically on identity development. Many of the identity developmental models used by student affairs professionals today stem from the work of Erik Erikson (1963, 1968). These models include work by Marcia (1966), Chickering (1969), Chickering and Reisser (1993), and Josselson (1987), all of which are well known to those working with college students. Arthur Chickering's (1969, 1993) psychosocial development theory has probably been the most widely used among student affairs professionals for decades. Applying Erikson's (1963, 1968) developmental model to college students, Chickering's theory describes the developmental tasks (called "vectors" to illustrate their non-sequential nature) students face as they leave home, attend college, and prepare to enter the "real world" as adults. These vectors include developing competence, managing emotions, moving through autonomy toward interdependence, developing mature interpersonal relationships, establishing identity, developing purpose and developing integrity.

James Marcia (1966) worked with Erikson's foundation to describe four ego identity statuses: foreclosure, identity diffusion, moratorium and identity achievement. Ruthellen Josselson (1987) applied Marcia's identity groups to college women and their search for identity. Both of these theoretical models have been used to guide college students through their career identity development.

Jeffrey Jensen Arnett (2000) introduced a new developmental theory called "Emerging Adults." Emerging adults are a recent phenomenon, and reflect changes in American society. Fifty years ago, most 18 – 25 year-olds would be married, probably have children, and have entered the work force. Current trends, including increased participation in higher education, geographic mobility, and delays in marriage and childbearing ages, combine to illustrate characteristics of this segment of the population. This population defies current developmental labels: while they are too old to be considered youth or adolescents, they do not exhibit the typical markers of adulthood outlined above. Thus Arnett posits the stage of emerging adulthood. The emerging adults model has five features: the age of instability, the self-focused age, the age of feeling in between, the age of possibilities and the age of identity development. This presentation focused mainly on the aspects of identity development, to outline Arnett's view of how emerging adults find and pursue career identities.

The presenter discussed Arnett's model in the context of the other development theories, to aid in understanding how his approach may provide insight into our understanding of college students and their development. The presentation will then provide some results of a study of two groups of first year students at a regional university. One group consisted of bioscience students who have stated an intention of pursuing a career path that requires a graduate or professional degree. The other group consisted of students who have not declared a major, and have no career plans. The attendees examined and discussed the initial career path decisions of these two groups of students in the context of these three developmental models.

After examining the emerging adults theoretical model and its utility in understanding student identity development, the presentation moved into a discussion among participants of a more recent, less data-based publication; Meg Jay's work with "twenty something" clients. Participants engaged in lively discussion of her findings in terms of their own experience with students.

Bibliography for Diane Wolter presentation
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