Introduction to Student Development Theory

What is Student Development Theory?
Student development is the way that a student grows, progresses, or increases his or her developmental capabilities as a result of enrollment in an institution of higher education.

There are three types of development:
- *Change* is an altered state, which may be positive or negative and progressive or regressive.
- *Growth* is an expansion, but may be positive or negative to overall functioning.
- *Development* is positive growth.

Theory is used to describe, explain, predict, and/or influence student development. In other words, student development theory can help you to better understand, support, and serve students. However, use caution when referring to student development theories. Students are individuals and theory is simply a guide; it is not applicable to all students in every situation. You should be aware of the use of labels and avoid using theory to manipulate students.

Types of Student Development Theory
- *Psychosocial* – deals with interpersonal and identity development of students: including how students define themselves, their relationships with others, and what they want to do with their lives.
- *Cognitive-Structural* – illuminates changes in the way people think and make decisions. Examines both intellectual and moral development.
- *Typology* – examines individual differences in how people view and relate to the world. Typologies are not developmental; they are used simply to observe innate individual differences (e.g., Myers-Briggs, Holland,).

<u>**Relevant Theories**</u>

Arthur Chickering and Linda Reisser: Theory of Identity Development (1993-Psychosocial)
Chickering & Reisser can be helpful in understanding the progression that students have in their identity development. Students will move through the seven vectors at different rates and in various orders. Vectors interact with and build upon one another.

1. *Vector 1 - Developing Competence*: Intellectual, physical and interpersonal
2. *Vector 2 - Managing Emotions*: Ability to recognize and accept emotions and express and control them
3. *Vector 3 - Moving Through Autonomy Toward Interdependence*: Emotional independence, self-direction, problem solving, and awareness of interconnectedness with others

4. *Vector 4 - Developing Mature Interpersonal Relationships*: Increased tolerance and appreciation of differences, and capacity for healthy, lasting, intimate relationships with partners and close friends
5. *Vector 5 - Establishing Identity*: Comfort with body and appearance, comfort with gender and sexual orientation, self-acceptance and self-esteem
6. *Vector 6 - Developing Purpose*: Developing clear vocational goals, personal interests and activities, strong interpersonal commitments, and intentionality.
7. *Vector 7 - Developing Integrity*: Humanizing values, personalizing values, and developing congruence

William Perry: Scheme of Intellectual and Ethical Development (1968 – Cognitive-Structural)
Students progress through Perry's scheme hierarchically, although some students may stray from straight-line development. Each stage represents a different way of thinking.

Perry's scheme provides insight to the behavior that you may observe from first-year students. They may share dichotomous thoughts in class discussions and become frustrated by your challenge to help them see the "grey" in situations. Students can be supported as they move from a place of dualistic thinking to more relative thinking by assignments that promote critical thinking and analytical consideration of information.

Four Stages:
1. *Dualism*: Students view the world dichotomously (right vs. wrong, black vs. white), and assume authorities have all the answers. Students typically have trouble with reflection, comparison, and analysis because they see learning as a simple information exchange and nothing more.
2. *Multiplicity*: "Everyone has the right to their own opinion." Students believe their peers are more legitimate sources of knowledge and multiple alternatives are now acceptable. Logic, data and evidence are viewed as less important, versus the amount of work done or time spent is seen as key.
3. *Relativism*: Students recognize the need to support opinions, while all opinions are no longer equally valid. Context is taken into account and analysis and synthesis now occur. The capacity for empathy is now present.
4. *Commitment to Relativism*: Students learn to tolerate ambiguity and to make choices in a contextual world. They develop a personal set of values and are able to make choices and commitments in the absence of complete information. Continual knowledge and learning becomes important.

Alexander Astin: Involvement Theory (1984)
Role of student involvement in development – States that for growth and learning to occur, students must be engaged in their environment. The amount of student learning and personal development is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement. The more students put in to an activity, the more they get out of it.

Vincent Tinto: Retention Theory (1987)
Several key factors are responsible for student attrition – a feeling of isolation, difficulty adjusting to a new environment, and an inability to integrate new information and knowledge with previous information and knowledge. As students transition into college during their freshman year, social and academic integration into the fabric of the university is critical.

Both Astin and Tinto theorized that students' academic and social integration with the university is a critical component of their development and, ultimately, their decision to persist to graduation. The first-year seminar is a prime environment for students to consider social integration and campus engagement. Introducing students to campus resources, encouraging involvement in clubs and organizations, promoting learning through service opportunities, etc. can prompt students to become engaged in their experience, thus enhancing their learning and development.

Nevitt Sanford: Challenge and Support (1967)
The notion of challenge and support as functions of growth and development has been written about quite frequently. People grow best where they continuously experience an appropriate balance of *support* and *challenge* (Sanford, 1967). Environments that are weighted too heavily in the direction of challenge without adequate support are toxic; they promote defensiveness and anxiety. Those weighted too heavily toward support without adequate challenge are ultimately boring; they promote lifelessness. Both kinds of imbalance lead to withdrawal. In contrast, the balance of support and challenge leads to vital engagement.

CHALLENGE

	Low	High	
	Disengage	Retreat	L
	Stagnate	Maximum Growth	H

(Right axis label: **SUPPORT**)

Other areas of interest for theorists include Racial and Ethnic Identity Development, Identity Development of Women, Sexual Identity Development, Moral Development, Vocational Theory, and Experiential Learning. Refer to references and additional readings for more information.

Works Cited:
Sanford, N. (1967) Where colleges fail: A study of the student as a person. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass