

How to Address Student Development Theory in Job Interviews

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Students in graduate programs in student affairs should spend time studying theories of student development. They are so important that students spend countless hours making index cards filled with information on each theory, including how they were developed and their stages. Even with all of that preparation, many graduate students feel underprepared to talk about uses of student development theories in job interviews. This article provides tips on preparing for theory-related interview questions and concludes with some thoughts on keeping student development theory as a part of your ongoing career development.

What is your favorite theory?

When interviewing for entry-level professional positions in student affairs, one commonly encounters questions dealing with student development theory. You may be asked to talk about your go-to theory. As is the case in many conversations involving student development theory, Chickering's (1993) vectors of development does not always have to be the answer. Be prepared to not only name a theory, but to be able to speak intelligently about a theory. What is it about a particular theory that resonates with you?

How would you apply theory?

You might also expect to be asked about how you would apply student development theory in your work as a student affairs professional. In responding to this type of question, it is important to think beyond the stages that comprise any theory. Recall one of the potential pitfalls of applying student development theory rests in a stage-based application with individual students. Theories can help us understand students' experiences, but we need to carefully avoid using theories to label or diagnose an individual student. For example, labeling a student I meet with as a dualistic thinker based on Perry's (1970) intellectual development theory does little to help me or the student.

If the focus in applying theory goes beyond a stage-by-stage approach, then where is the focus? Student development theories provide a foundation for your work as a student affairs professional. Each theory can be used to develop a basis for understanding the developmental paths that students might take. With this understanding, you can make connections to broader areas. For example, you are asked how you might utilize student development theory in advising the Interfraternity Council (IFC). You might draw on campus environment theories, such as those by Astin (1984) and Schlossberg (1989), to help you think about the ways the IFC members interact in the setting and structure of that group. Or, you might use King and Kitchener's (2000) reflective judgment model to design activities to help students talk through group decision making. Both of these examples represent broad approaches to working with students.

The homerun

What is the magic answer to any question regarding the application or utilization of student development theory? There is not one, at least not entirely. Recently, Kevin Kruger, who is the president of NASPA—Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA), said assessment is the most important competency for new professionals and graduate students to develop (NASPATweets, 2013). Student development theory should drive assessment through the development and evaluation of learning outcomes. If we are to assess the impact that students' experiences are having on their learning and development, then we need a grounded approach in theory. Student development theory *is* that grounded approach.

Become a lifelong learner

As you prepare to enter the professional realm of student affairs or transition to another career role, learning more about student development theory is probably the last thing on your mind. There is a lot of great research on theories, both directly in student affairs and in related academic fields. More theories about psychosocial identity development specific to individual subpopulations are being developed. Neo-Kohlbergian perspectives on moral judgment and reasoning continue to evolve. Conversations about these theory developments are taking place in a number of settings: scholarly journals, professional publications, professional associations, and social media.

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