Preparing to Address Student Development Theories During the Job Interview
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As first year graduate students in a higher education program, we (Julie and David) do not have much professional experience interviewing candidates for professional positions. In one year, however, we will be entering the job market and looking at positions in fraternity and sorority advising. In our graduate program we took student development theory during the first semester, and we learned about the foundational aspects of theory in all areas of student affairs. This leads us to wonder – what should we know about student development theory as we prepare for job interviews? What questions might we be asked regarding different theoretical concepts?

As part of our student development theory course, we conducted informational interviews via Skype with student affairs professionals across the United States and Canada about the role of theory in their work. David specifically asked professionals about the expectations they have of a job applicant when it comes to their knowledge of theory. Surprisingly, many of the professionals responded that theory was not discussed in-depth during job interviews. For new hires, they are more concerned about whether the applicant can fulfill the expectations of the job. They believe that the theoretical aspects of the job can be learned. Julie also learned from her interviews that questions related to student development theories were minimal during job interviews.

Of course, this phenomenon is not a reflection of every institution. Showing proficiency in applying theories to programming efforts and educational conversations can give you a clear advantage over those who cannot. Additionally, articulating any of these theories during the interview process does not require memorization of every phase, vector, cycle, or stage.

Both of us have been members of our fraternal organizations for many years, and our experiences with our chapters and on our councils can serve as reference points for several student development theories we have learned in our graduate course with Melissa. Therefore, we recognize that student development theory is deeply rooted in all of the aspects of our positions – risk management, recruitment, expansion, anti-hazing education, chapter management, values-based education, and leadership development. Often the theory gets lost in the high-pressure, quick-response aspects of the position. While we may not quote Chickering and Reisser directly in an interview, it is important that the theoretical concepts behind our work are not forgotten.

A few of the theories we have identified as relevant to fraternity/sorority professionals include the learning partnerships model (Baxter Magolda & King, 2004), self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 1999), and the wide range of social identity theories. The Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors (AFA) has thoughtfully put together a great resource on the application of student development theory to our work (AFA 2012a, 2012b) complete with summaries, case studies, and further readings. We highly recommend job applicants review these resources, particularly the case studies, prior to an interview in order to better prepare.

Although you may not be asked many questions about student development theory during an interview, as we learned during our class exercise, employers want to see that you can still infuse your answers with theory-based examples. Even if you do not feel your background in theory is as strong as it could be, we do highly recommend reviewing the AFA resource guides on student development theory to help you form a better understanding of the application of theory to your potential position working in the fraternal movement. While the recitation of too many theories without substance might make you

sound disingenuous, we find selecting one or two theories and expounding upon them to be an effective approach.

Remember, student development theory exists to help grow our students. The learning outcomes that stem from these concepts should be kept at the forefront of our work. By understanding the application of student development theory to our role as fraternity/sorority professionals, you should be able to confidently answer any theory question that comes your way in an interview.

References

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