College Student Mental Health Counseling

A Developmental Approach

Suzanne Degges-White, PhD, LPC, LMHC, NCC
Christine Borzumato-Gainey, PhD, LPC
Editors

“Addressing a wide range of academic, career, social, relational, and clinical issues, the authors of this book provide a wealth of information that is sure to inform the practice of both novice and experienced college counselors.”
—Joshua C. Watson, PhD, LPC, NCC, Editor, Journal of College Counseling

Using a unique developmental focus, this clinical handbook provides college counseling professionals and trainees with strategies for addressing the most pressing and frequently encountered issues presented by college students. It underscores the importance of understanding the multifaceted development of these emerging adults as they face novel challenges on campus. Problems are addressed from the perspective of biological, psychological, cognitive, and social development.

The text considers issues faced by the student population according to both college year (freshman, senior, etc.) and the academic calendar, such as spring and winter breaks and exam periods. It also addresses the particular needs of nontraditional students and the impact of cultural identity on the way in which a disorder manifests or is best treated. The only book to provide a dual focus on the role of development as it affects clinical concerns of contemporary college students, it provides detailed information on such prevalent presenting issues as major depressive disorder, anxiety, substance abuse and addiction, eating disorders, grief, self-injury, social adjustment concerns, and intimate relationships.

In addition to providing an overview of development and the unique challenges faced by college students as they move from adolescence into young adulthood, this text provides best-practice treatment strategies that take into account the time-limited nature of treatment in most college counseling centers. Illustrative case studies, based on actual student clients from the authors’ experiences, are included throughout the book. College Student Mental Health Counseling will be useful as both a text and a go-to reference for all college mental health counselors and related professionals.

Key Features:
• Offers a developmental approach for understanding the psychological, emotional, and social development of students in higher education
• Uses the standard academic calendar as a framework to discuss presenting issues, based on college class (freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior)
• Provides innovative strategies and interventions that are framed within the brief counseling model
• Addresses social concerns and primary adjustment issues as well as more severe clinical disorders
• Explores the impact of cultural identity on the way in which a disorder manifests or is best treated

College Student Mental Health Counseling
Suzanne Degges-White, PhD, LPC, LMHC, NCC, is professor and chair of the counseling, adult and higher education department at Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, Illinois. Her research interests include adult wellness over the life span from adolescence through older adulthood, the use of the expressive arts in counseling, and sexual identity development. She enjoys working with adolescents and adults in her private practice and integrating expressive arts interventions to encourage clients to explore multiple methods of communication and self-exploration. She is the author of the book *Friends Forever: How Girls and Women Forge Lasting Relationships* (2011) and coeditor of *Counseling Boys and Young Men* (2012) and *Integrating the Expressive Arts Into Counseling Practice* (2011).

Christine Borzumato-Gainey, PhD, LPC, is a counselor and instructor at Elon University in Elon, North Carolina. She received her doctoral degree in counseling and counseling supervision from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. She is currently a mental health counselor at the Elon University Counseling Center as well as director of the BASICS program, which addresses substance abuse concerns of students. She has over a decade of experience working within the college setting, is the author of several publications and presentations addressing this population, and is coauthor of *Friends Forever: How Girls and Women Forge Lasting Relationships* (2011).
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We dedicate this book to all of the emerging adults that follow a path that leads to campus.
Contents

Contributors ix
Preface xiii
Acknowledgments xvii

Section I: Developmental Issues

1. The Myriad Faces of College Student Development 1
   Katherine M. Hermann, Esther Nicole Benoit, Amy Zavadil, and Leslie Kooyman

2. Counseling Concerns Over the College Academic Year 13
   Joshua Magruder and Suzanne Degges-White

3. Underclassmen: Making the Transition 29
   Wendy Killam

4. College Upperclassmen: Preparing to Launch 41
   Katherine M. Hermann and Esther Nicole Benoit

Section II: Social, Cultural, and Relational Challenges on Campus

5. Understanding Diverse Populations on the College Campus 51
   Amy Zavadil and Leslie Kooyman

6. Social Involvement: Helping Students Find Their Place in Campus Life 69
   Nathan R. Booth, Sterling P. Travis, Christine Borzumato-Gainey, and Suzanne Degges-White

7. The Journey of Grief and Loss for College Students: Clinical Interventions 81
   Christine Borzumato-Gainey and Elise Noyes
8. The “Beauty Pageant Effect” on Campus: Consequences and Clinical Implications 97
   Meghan Lynwood Reppert, Catherine B. Roland, and Marcela Kepicova

9. Hook-Up or Healthy Relationship? Counseling Student Partnering Through the College Years 113
   Rebecca Earhart Michel and Nicole M. Randick

10. Counseling College Students About Sexuality and Sexual Activity
    Carrie V. Smith, Emily Franklin, Christine Borzumato-Gainey, and Suzanne Degges-White 133

Section III: Clinical Issues in a College Setting

11. Understanding and Treating Eating Disorders With College Students 155
    Caroline S. Booth and Gregory S. Phipps

12. Substance Abuse and Dependence Treatment in the College Setting 185
    Edward F. Hudspeth and Kimberly Matthews

13. Depression in College Students: Diagnosis, Treatment, and Campus Planning 219
    Stephanie C. Bell, Susan R. Barclay, and Kevin B. Stoltz

14. Anxiety Disorders and Treatment Strategies for College Students 237
    Tony Michael

15. Nonsuicidal Self-Injury and Treatment Strategies for College Students 255
    Ian Turnage-Butterbaugh

16. Suicidal College Students: Intervention Strategies 277
    Kevin B. Stoltz, Laura McShane Schulenberg, and Jeane B. Lee

17. Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder and Treatment Strategies for College Students 297
    Kattrina Miller-Roach and Ricardo M. Phipps

18. Impulse-Control Disorders and Interventions for College Students 315
    Edward F. Hudspeth and Kimberly Matthews

19. Promoting Student Well-Being on Campus: It Takes a Village 339
    Lori A. Wolff, Susan R. Barclay, and Megan M. Buning

Index 355
Contributors

Susan R. Barclay, PhD, LPC, NCC, ACS
Department of Leadership Studies
University of Central Arkansas
Conway, AR

Stephanie C. Bell, MA
Department of Leadership and Counselor Education
The University of Mississippi
University, MS

Esther Nicole Benoit, PhD, LPC, NCC
College of Social and Behavioral Sciences
Walden University
Minneapolis, MN

Caroline S. Booth, PhD, LPC, NCC
Department of Human Development and Services
North Carolina A&T State University
Greensboro, NC

Nathan R. Booth, MEd
Department of Leadership and Counselor Education
The University of Mississippi
University, MS

Megan M. Buning, PhD
Department of Leadership and Counselor Education
The University of Mississippi
University, MS

Emily Franklin, MEd
Department of Leadership and Counselor Education
The University of Mississippi
University, MS
Contributors

Katherine M. Hermann, PhD
Department of Counselor Education
University of Louisiana at Lafayette
Lafayette, LA

Edward F. Hudspeth, PhD, NCC, LPC, RPh, RPT-S, ACS
Assistant Professor, Counselor Education
Henderson State University
Arkadelphia, AR

Marcela Kepicova, MA, EdS, LPC, NCC
Doctoral Fellow, Counselor Education
Montclair State University
Montclair, NJ

Wendy Killam, PhD, NCC, CRC, LPC
Director, Clinical Mental Health Counseling Program
Stephen F. Austin State University
Nacogdoches, TX

Leslie Kooyman, PhD
Montclair State University
Montclair, NJ

Jeane B. Lee, PhD
Associate Professor, Counselor Education
Alabama State University
Montgomery, AL

Joshua Magruder, PhD, LPC, NCC
The University of Mississippi Counseling Center
University, MS

Kimberly Matthews, MEd
Department of Leadership and Counselor Education
The University of Mississippi
University, MS

Tony Michael, MA, LPC
Department of Leadership and Counselor Education
The University of Mississippi
University, MS

Rebecca Earhart Michel, PhD, LCPC, NCC
Division of Psychology and Counseling
Governors State University
University Park, IL

Kattrina Miller-Roach, MA
Department of Leadership and Counselor Education
The University of Mississippi
University, MS

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Elise Noyes
Elon University
Elon, NC

Gregory S. Phipps, BS
Doctoral Student, Department of Human Development and Services
North Carolina A&T State University
Greensboro, NC

Ricardo M. Phipps, MA
Department of Leadership and Counselor Education
The University of Mississippi
University, MS

Nicole M. Randick, MAT, ATR-BC, LPC
Counselor Education and Supervision
Division of Psychology and Counseling
Governors State University
University Park, IL

Meghan Lynwood Reppert, MA
Department of Counseling and Educational Leadership
Montclair State University
Montclair, NJ

Catherine B. Roland, PhD
Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling, and Special Education
Georgia Regents University
Augusta, GA

Laura McShane Schultenberg, BA, MAT
Department of Leadership and Counselor Education
The University of Mississippi
University, MS

Carrie V. Smith, MEd
Department of Counseling and Human Development Services
University of Georgia
Athens, GA

Kevin B. Stoltz, PhD, NCC, ACS, LPC
Department of Leadership and Counselor Education
The University of Mississippi
University, MS

Sterling P. Travis, MEd
Doctoral Student
Counselor Education
The College of William and Mary
Williamsburg, VA
Contributors

Ian Turnage-Butterbaugh, MS
Department of Leadership and Counselor Education
The University of Mississippi
University, MS

Lori A. Wolff, PhD, JD
Department of Leadership and Counselor Education
The University of Mississippi
University, MS

Amy Zavadil, MA, NCC
Community Conduct Director
Barnard College
New York, NY
Preface

An increasing number of students arriving on college campuses are struggling with mental health disorders in addition to managing the typical college transition challenges. According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (Gruttadaro & Crudo, 2012), depressive disorders and anxiety disorders are just two of the many significant self-reported presenting issues college counselors might be called on to address. It is well known that the stigma attached to mental health concerns results in a lower reporting of incidences than is actually experienced, so there are likely many more students who have neither acknowledged nor sought help for their mental health distress. Newspapers and television news shows continue to highlight the mental health crisis on the nation’s college campuses, and it is clear that college counselors must be prepared to assist this population. We hope this book will provide useful information that will allow counselors to gain a deeper understanding of how college students may be affected by mental health issues, as well as how best to work with these students within the campus counseling office confines. Further, we provide a developmental framework for understanding this population—a great deal happens to young adults from the ages of 17 to 22, and we emphasize the importance of viewing each member of this population as a “work in progress.”

THE SCOPE OF THE BOOK

This book offers an in-depth look at the ways in which contemporary undergraduate students may differ from past generations, as well as noting how some things never change, such as needs related to finding social support, romantic intimacy, and academic achievement. The first chapter of this book, “The Myriad Faces of College Student Development,”
Preface

provides a brief overview of the various developmental transformations that are taking place within the many levels of cognitive, affective, and physiological development of emerging adults.

Next, we lay out the typical counseling concerns that counselors can expect to meet across the academic year. Rather than provide a clinical and empirical review of the literature, however, this chapter is written from the perspective of a well-seasoned counselor who has witnessed the tide of presenting issues over the year in the college counseling center. Because the experiences of each class differ markedly from one another, we have divided this chapter according to class year: freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors. We then provide a closer look at the obstacles and transitions that are faced by underclassmen (freshmen and sophomores) and by upperclassmen (juniors and seniors). These first four chapters offer a holistic perspective on how the inner development of students influences their responses to the external transitions they face.

The next two chapters of the book address the social concerns of students as they seek to find the best way to fit in on campus. We address the growing diversity of college campuses as well as provide counselors with guidance on helping their clients connect into the campus community. Following these two chapters, we move into ways to assist clients who are facing unexpected hurdles, including grief over the loss of significant others; difficulties with self-esteem and self-image presented by the competitive culture of college-age females; and navigational challenges in romantic relationships that may be more intense and sexually tinged than prior high school relationships had been.

In Chapters 11 through 18, we address specific mental health disorders that frequently appear in the college-age population. We provide information about how relevant symptoms may manifest in a college student population, as well as provide a framework for understanding the challenges each disorder presents within an academic and social setting. The chapters also provide guidelines for treatment and intervention that are relevant to college counselors working within a brief counseling framework. Topics include eating disorders, substance abuse, depression, anxiety, self-injury, suicidal students, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and impulse-control disorders. Finally, the last chapter provides readers with ideas for promoting student well-being beyond the counseling office.

WHO WILL BENEFIT FROM THIS BOOK?

While this book’s primary audience is college counselors or students in higher education counseling programs, it is an excellent resource for anyone working with the college-aged population, whether through students affairs, admissions, or other areas. Although the focus of the book is on
undergraduates, much of the information is relevant to those who work with graduate students or young adults in other settings. By taking a closer look at the social, academic, and professional transitions of young adults, we have created a guide that can benefit anyone who is committed to facilitating the development of these individuals.

OVERALL VALUE OF THIS BOOK

There are many treatment planners available to mental health counselors, but we wanted to provide a resource that went beyond a broad “cookbook approach” to meeting mental health needs. We believe that helpers must be highly cognizant of the inner development that emerging adult clients are experiencing as they face the novel challenges met on campus. In order for readers to gain the best understanding possible, we’ve not only used a developmental lens to frame the mental health problems of students, but have simultaneously considered and applied the concepts to students within the college environment. The case studies and symptom presentation descriptions provided are actual composites of the college student clients we have treated. A lot has to happen in the years students are on campus, and the inherent stress experienced when they are faced with new challenges frequently encourages students to seek help. We believe this book will provide a very useful breadth and depth of knowledge to our readers.

REFERENCE

Acknowledgments

The development of this book was dependent upon the labor and commitment of a group of individuals who are dedicated to meeting the needs of the contemporary college student population as effectively as possible. We are indebted to our collaborators and contributors who shared expertise that can be gained only through firsthand experience with this unique population. We also would like to acknowledge the strong support and insightful assistance provided by our Springer Publishing Company copilots Nancy Hale and Katie Corasaniti. This book springs from a desire to better meet client needs as well as offer readers a contemporary and very timely perspective on the experiences and counseling needs of this “emerging adult” population, and we acknowledge that this is best accomplished through teamwork and sharing knowledge. Thank you to all of the members of our team—we share the collective knowledge within the covers of this book.

S.E.D. & C.J.B.

To my coeditor, Christine; thank you for being the spark that ignited the enthusiasm that brought this project from just a “good idea” into a robust resource for college personnel—I appreciate the energy and passion you bring to every collaborative project. I am also grateful to my partner, Ellen, and our three children, Georgia, Andrew, and David. All of the kids are “emerging adults” at this moment in time and they have provided me with what seems to be a more than generous number of firsthand learning opportunities about the challenges young adults face during this developmental stage. However, watching each of them follow their winding paths to adulthood—challenges and all—brings immeasurable joy that overshadows those few moments of terror!

S.E.D.
I am indebted to my coeditor, Suzanne, for including me on this wild book ride. My academic life would not have the same zest without your support or your adventures. I would also like to acknowledge Chris Troxler, the “Superman of Counseling,” for sharing his wisdom that helped guide the framework of this book. And a special thanks to my little family, Howard, Brooke, and Drew, for their love, patience, and the efforts they made to be self-sufficient while I was engrossed in the creation of this book.

C.J.B.
For counselors working in higher education and with increasingly diverse populations, it is essential to understand the worldview of the client. The years in which a student is traditionally engaged in higher education are a time of great personal development and reflect changes in many aspects of a student’s functioning. The duration of this transitional period, now termed *emerging adulthood*, is increasing, and for a large number of individuals, this development is fostered during the college years (Arnett, Ramos, & Jensen, 2001). As access to education has evolved, moving on to college is expected for more than half of all graduating American high school students (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012; National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, 2008). It is important to recognize, however, that students represent a diverse range of experiences, skills, and abilities, approaching this life transition from a variety of perspectives.

Tinto (2006), writing about college retention, asserted the importance of “the concept of integration and the patterns of interaction between the student and other members of the institution especially during the critical first year of college and the stages of transition that marked that year” (p. 3). During the 1960s and 1970s, theories of college student development emerged, and have continued to evolve and develop as demographics have changed (Gardner, 2009). Gardner (2009) summarized the series of student development theories that build upon the work of Erikson’s
life span development theory, focusing specifically on the college years. Many models exist, with a common expectation of the need to resolve an issue or develop a skill to progress in the developmental process (Gardner, 2009). Practitioners have also recognized the need for awareness of the ever-changing demographics, and corresponding needs, of college students (Astin, 1998; Bishop, Lacour, Nutt, Yamada, & Lee, 2004). As the population of individuals entering college increases in diversity and numbers, it is important to consider the range of developmental needs that may impact, as well as be a result of, the transition to college as part of this stage of the life span. For some, the transition to college may be a relatively quick settling in during the first semester of a student’s first year, but this time of transition is more likely to span the first years of the college as students navigate their own complexity within a diverse community.

Developmentally, the college years are a time for developing oneself including self-sufficiency and personal responsibility (Arnett, 2003). College campuses strive to provide a supportive environment geared toward challenging students to grow and develop. Look to the mission statement of most colleges, and words like growth, citizenship, development, and responsibility are anticipated outcomes of the college or university experience. The evolving demographic of college students is well documented, specifically through 40 years of data collection with the Cooperative Institutional Research Program Freshman Survey (Pryor, Hurtado, Saenz, Santos, & Korn, 2007), as well as discussion of the impact of changing demographics through the scholarly literature (Astin, 1998; Bishop et al., 2004). Thus, when conceptualizing college students, there are many developmental models through which we can view this population. College students are still very much adolescents and the developmental path of this group moves through many different landscapes, including cognitive, psychosocial, neurological, and emotional realms. The following models provide a lens through which we may be able to better understand students’ adaptive or maladaptive methods of approaching the many challenges of the college years. Each of these descriptions can be isolated to explain specific actions and conflicts, or they can be reflected upon collectively to expound on college students’ experiences and reactions to events. We will begin with one of the more recently developed perspectives on this group, through the lens of understanding the emerging adult.

EMERGING ADULTHOOD

Jeffrey Jensen Arnett (2000, 2012) presents one avenue for understanding the college years in current literature. He identified emerging adulthood as the transition period from adolescence to young adulthood and used
the ages of 18 and 25 as boundary points. During this time most individu-
als have not yet experienced many of the developmental tasks indicative
of a transition into adulthood such as marriage, parenting, or occupa-
tional stability, yet these topics are the focus areas for the transitions that
will occur during this period.

Emerging adulthood is a time when goals that focus largely on
exploration of identity and life course, including career, education, and
described this as a period of role hiatus in which burgeoning autonomy,
coupled with a lack of persistent adult responsibilities, allows individu-
als to experiment and explore. This extended period of exploration
and learning acts as a bridge between childhood dependence and adult
roles and responsibilities (Roisman, Masten, Coatsworth, & Tellegen,
2004).

Overall, well-being tends to be stable over time; however, emerging
adulthood is one period of the life span when well-being can shift dra-
matically (Schulenberg, Bryant, & O’Malley, 2004). While the transition
from college to work can be disorienting, the smoothness of this shift
is not necessarily associated with overall satisfaction (Murphy, Blustein,
Bohlig, & Platt, 2010). This finding may suggest that the struggles expe-
rienced by college upperclassmen are a normative, and even an addi-
tive, component of emerging adulthood. It should be noted that although
the concepts of emerging and young adulthood are supported in the
research literature, these are culturally bound constructs and not immu-
table developmental truths.

AN ECOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENTAL MODEL

An ecological developmental framework offers a perspective of this
time of identity exploration, as well as physiological, physical, social,
and emotional change. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) identify areas
of student change, such as psychosocial and cognitive-structural, that
occur within the transition to college. Particularly with traditional-aged
first- and second-year college students, the individual college student
transitions from his or her familiar adolescent environment to a college
environment marked by both opportunity and expectation of individ-
ual responsibility. Students bring to this transitional experience a vast
range of life experiences. Student persistence and retention, staying
in school to achieve the desired goal (often a diploma), are complex
issues. Engagement, students’ connection within their educational com-
munity, particularly in the first years of college, supports retention and
requires recognizing the diversity of students and their environments
(Tinto, 2006).
Bronfenbrenner (1977) provides an ecological development framework for considering the development of the individual within the context of his or her environment. This includes considering not only the current environment, but also the many systems that can shape an individual. Bronfenbrenner defined microsystems as the person-environment relationship related to a setting, taking into account elements such as place, time, activity, and role of the individual (p. 514). Students who are classmates in their first year of college provide an example of a microsystem. Each student, though sharing this microsystem as a member of an incoming class at a specific institution, is influenced by the mesosystem, that is, interaction with other specific current influences such as family, peers, work, or other school experiences. This in turn is influenced by an exosystem, which is defined as broader societal institutions, such as government, school, media, or neighborhood influences, which impact the individual, but are not directly controlled by the individual. The exosystem includes college policies and practices that are defined by others, yet will influence students. Finally, the macrosystem in which these systems all are encompassed can be described as the cultural influences that underlie and inform each of the other environments. Taylor (2008) describes student’s involvement in the micro-, meso-, and eco-systems as “important variables that play a part in the developmental process” (p. 220). In addition to individual characteristics and personal experiences, the salient environmental influences of an individual can vary at any given time. This framework can be visualized as a Venn diagram showing both overlap and unique influence among the various ecological factors (Bronfenbrenner, pp. 514–515).

Although we may first envision students as categories, that is, freshmen, sophomores, and so forth, it is essential to recognize the heterogeneity of each group’s population. In preparation for work with college students, a broad ecological view of the variety of possible factors, experiences, and environments that can impact individual development is helpful to effectively support a client as well as encourage a campus community conducive to individual and community growth. Adjustment to college includes adjustment to academic, emotional, and social realms. Considering the individual student’s characteristics and life experiences can inform responses to both identified and anticipated needs, as well as support development within each realm. We must remember that while the college experience brings together groups of students facing similar transitions and challenges, students will also face their own personal challenges that reflect their identities and personal path.
PSYCHOSOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Erik Erikson, one of the pioneers of developmental stage models, designed a theory describing individuals’ progression through eight developmental stages from birth into adulthood. In this model, Erikson offers insight into the typical interpersonal conflicts and important life events during each period. According to this framework, the sixth stage of development, Young Adulthood, marks a period when individuals, between the ages of 19 and 40, focus on forming close, loving relationships. During this stage, individuals battle isolation as they search for intimacy and meaningful connections with others. For many, this transition is reflected in the commitment to another individual and/or the desire to form a family of one’s own.

Negotiating the interpersonal conflicts surrounding the resolution between intimacy and isolation can be a unique struggle during the later years of college. As students strive to become adults—establishing secure identities, becoming independent, and conforming to social standards (Barry, Madsen, Nelson, Carroll, & Badger, 2009)—they must negotiate the coexistence of meaningful relationships with their postgraduation goals and current obligations. For many individuals, this growth process requires a balance of forming meaningful romantic relationships while cultivating the self-understanding necessary for individual identity formation. While this can be a valuable period for exploration and formation of building meaningful lifelong connections, conflict can arise when students are unable to concurrently balance their connection to their social network and their romantic partner or when they seek to find stability during this period of transition by coupling. Erikson’s model provides valuable insight into a natural area of conflict that many college students experience—the link between identity and intimacy. This issue will be discussed in further detail in chapters addressing sexuality and romantic relationships.

PERRY’S INTELLECTUAL SCHEMA

Like Erikson, William Perry created a structure for understanding developmental growth. Perry’s research, a reaction to his observation of “increase[ed] relativism in society and diversity on campus” following World War II (Love & Guthrie, 1999, p. 5), provides a developmental epistemology for investigating the lifetime evolution of individuals’ knowledge (McAuliffe & Lovell, 2006). Through his longitudinal research on over 500 students at Harvard and Radcliffe, Perry created
a nine-position, four-stage developmental sequence to describe undergraduate students' process of making meaning during their academic and personal college experience (Granello, 2002; Love & Guthrie, 1999; West, 2004).

Perry's model provides a “map” of adult intellectual and moral development/ethical changes. Students begin at the most basic stage of dualistic thinking; in this stage, individuals perceive a simple “right or wrong” answer to every question or challenge. Thus, students are eager to gain facts, which they believe will provide the knowledge necessary to succeed. The next stage is multiplicity in which there is the realization that there is no real single truth and that knowledge is much more subjective than once believed. As students begin to recognize that answers still need to be found, they begin to move into the third stage, relativism. In this stage, ambiguity in knowledge and answers is recognized as an unavoidable circumstance, and students may be discombobulated by the recognition that all answers must be evaluated and that all answers may have merit. This disequilibrium may move a student forcefully into the final stage, commitment. This may reflect a commitment to a vocational path or moral ideals and marks the ability of the student to hold conflicting viewpoints and accept ambiguity from a point of personal commitment (Granello, 2002; Love & Guthrie, 1999; McAuliffe & Lovell, 2006). These hallmarks of higher development and stronger identity formation are more frequently characteristic of the behaviors observed within students during the end of their college experience. Advanced reasoning capabilities enable students to manage additional stressors and developmental challenges. As a result, students are not paralyzed by a search for a single truth and definitive result, but are comfortable navigating through unclear experiences.

Ideally, college students progress through the early dualistic developmental positions during their first year in college, and acquire relativistic reasoning capabilities before graduation. Nevertheless, research presents conflicting evidence about the average student position at the time of graduation (Love & Guthrie, 1999), with some evidence suggesting students can graduate from a university without reaching a relativistic level of reasoning. In addition, in times of high uncertainty and unbalanced levels of challenge and support, students may regress to earlier developmental positions in search of comfort and security. This notion of seeking security and operating within an established support system is closely related to the challenges described by Erikson during this period of life. If individuals are capable of negotiating the need for connection away from isolation, they may be better equipped with peer and/or romantic support that will encourage their success as they embark from an environment of familiarity into an uncertain milieu.

The demonstration of dualistic reasoning—whether the byproduct of external factors, life circumstances, situational regression, or other
variables—may result in students who are less capable of operating within an environment of high uncertainty. For these students, the many transitions during the later college years may be particularly challenging.

**MORAL DEVELOPMENT**

The transition to college coincides with development in moral reasoning, as an individual’s process of response to a moral dilemma evolves over time. Lawrence Kohlberg describes development across three levels of moral reasoning related to ethical behavior (Power, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1991; Terenzini, 1987). The work of Kohlberg focused on an ethic of justice or fairness, whereas Carol Gilligan expanded on this notion with the perspective of an ethic of care or responsiveness to others (Gilligan, 1988). Gilligan’s work introduced gender differences in how one approaches moral reasoning.

As students operate from different stages or levels of moral development, as well as an individual place on the spectrum of the ethic of justice or care, managing student conflict is increasingly complex. Students at different stages of moral development will react differently to similar social, academic, and cocurricular experiences; conversely, exposure to a variety of such experiences can serve to support moral development (Mayhew, Seifert, & Pascarella, 2010). As with other aspects of student growth, providing opportunity for student engagement, as well as sufficient challenge, can support moral development and enhance ethical decision making to benefit the individual and their current community.

**EGO DEVELOPMENT**

Jane Loevinger’s (1966) theory of ego development offers yet another valuable developmental framework for understanding the experiences of this population. In the 1960s, Loevinger formulated the theory of ego development as “the way individuals make meaning of their personal life experience and the world at large” (Krumpe, 2002, p. 1). Since her original research, ego development has been described as “the organizing aspect of personality, or as the ‘master trait’ [since] it organizes and governs how a person perceives and thinks about a problem, and thus determines how a person behaves” (Clements & Swensen, 2000, p. 1; Sheaffer, Sias, Toriello, & Cubero, 2008; Swensen, Eskew, & Kohlhepp, 1981).

Loevinger organized the developmental process into nine stages, which begin during infancy and continue throughout the lifetime. Like many stage models, ego development unfolds as a linear process whereby each new stage builds upon mastery of the previous. These stages are...
not associated with age, and advancement to a subsequent stage is not predicted based on an established interval; rather, individuals advance at unique rates as they experience various milestones. Ego development is dependent upon an individual’s potential and environment; nevertheless, one’s preexisting, intrinsic, and intellectual capacity may restrict growth potential. As described with Perry’s developmental schema, individuals can regress to previous stages of development during periods of increased stress.

Current literature links an array of positive characteristics to higher ego development levels, such as “increased nurturance, trust, interpersonal sensitivity, valuing of individuality, psychological mindedness, responsibility, and inner control” (Hauser, Gerber, & Allen, 1998, p. 209), characteristics that are ideally cultivated in students prior to leaving college. However, data on the developmental progression of college students have been rather inconclusive. While scholars often assume college students experience a consistent advancement during their academic careers as a result of increased stressors, some data indicate that college seniors experience a decline in their developmental level (Loevinger et al., 1985). Some speculate this decline may be the result of increased stressors prior to graduation when testing has been administered. Regardless, this organizing principle of personality provides a structure for understanding the growth demonstrated by many students as they accept a greater sense of personal responsibility and ability to self-reflect, and begin to exhibit greater tolerance and acceptance of others. Developmental growth along this continuum may be especially meaningful as college students prepare for employment, where personal responsibility and the ability to understand and tolerate divergent perspectives are of great benefit.

**BRAIN DEVELOPMENT**

The ramifications of students’ ongoing physical development are a final developmental transition with explanatory power. Because all individuals do not progress along a uniform timeline physically, college students, especially males, are likely to continue to experience physical changes. One area of consequence is the brain’s developmental course. The prefrontal cortex, one of three areas of the frontal lobe, is the last area of the brain to finish developing, usually around the mid-20s. This area of the brain, described as having neuropsychological functions, is strongly related to behavior (Miller, 2007). When the prefrontal cortex is fully formed, individuals typically have acquired the advanced reasoning skills associated with adult maturity such as the recognition of consequences to actions, avoidance of socially unacceptable behaviors, foresight, reduced impulsivity, and increased organization (Giedd, 2008; Miller, 2007).
In many instances, this advanced stage of brain development closely coincides with the completion of an undergraduate program, so as students prepare for greater levels of responsibility, they simultaneously recognize the ramifications of their actions and the importance of their decisions. The combination of actual and recognized responsibility can be overwhelming for some students, yet the balance of ability and opportunity is one of the unique markers of this life stage.

REFERENCES


