

Chickering and Reisser's Seven Vectors of Development:  
Using the Theory to Assess Three Students

Corey Friend

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Bowling Green State University

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Chickering and Reisser's (1993) model of the seven vectors of development in *Education and Identity* has greatly increased educators' abilities to understand students' growth and to provide developmental opportunities for students' lives. I interviewed three students using Chickering and Reisser's framework of the seven vectors. In the hopes of procuring a wider diversity of responses, I interviewed three students of different backgrounds and educational statuses.

The first student interviewed, given the pseudonym of Mr. Blue, is a current graduate student. He grew up in the Midwest, is White, and married. He went to a small private liberal arts institution in the Midwest and has never lived, worked, or studied outside of his home state. After completing his bachelor's degree from his undergraduate institution and working in the field for four years, he returned to higher education in pursuit of an advanced degree in that field.

The second student, referred to as Mr. Green, is a rising senior at his university. After growing up in the Eastern United States, he came to the Midwest to attend a private liberal arts institution for his undergraduate education. He is Black and lives with his mother, as his parents are divorced. The third student, referred to as Ms. Red, is a rising junior at her university. She is a White woman who grew up and attends college in the Midwest, but her home and university are in different states.

### **FUNDAMENTAL IDEAS OF THE SEVEN VECTORS**

Chickering and Reisser's seven vectors explore a college student's development from establishing the foundations of competence and routine to developing integrity and determining vocation. As a sequential psychosocial theory, students must have experienced significant levels of development during the first vectors in order to succeed

in later vectors. The vectors lead to significant changes in the modes and methods of “thinking, feeling, behaving, valuing, and relating to others and to oneself” (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 2). Chickering and Reisser (1993) discuss that the goal for student affairs practitioners in applying the seven vectors is to foster an environment that allows students to grow in the above actions by developing the moral, intellectual, physical, and practical gifts of students (p. 41). While various student affairs practitioners and theorists focus on individual aspects of the student, the seven vectors address the moral, intellectual, physical, and practical aspects of development, emphasizing a holistic approach to student development.

The first vector is developing competence, which focuses on the development of intellectual, physical, manual, and interpersonal skills. The realm of intellectual development includes three broad areas of research, specifically the acquisition of subject matter knowledge and academic skills, gains in cultural, aesthetic, and intellectual sophistication, and the development of general intellectual and cognitive skills (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 55). The foundations of routines and habits are explored in the first vector, as these foundations prove critical in a student’s further development along the vectors.

Chickering and Reisser (1993) discuss how the participation in athletic and cultural activities affects a student’s physical and manual competency, as there are developmental impacts of participating in these activities (p. 63). The participation in these activities assists students in developing appropriate emotional responses and management techniques, as well as exposes students to group experiences. The ability to

work and communicate effectively in and establish relationships with diverse groups becomes essential in students' development in later vectors.

Through the second vector, managing emotions, Chickering and Reisser explore how students learn to recognize and accept their emotions as being valid and permit those emotions to exist. The feelings that are most likely to be experienced by students are fear and anxiety, anger leading to aggression, depression, guilt, and shame, and dysfunctional sexual or romantic attraction (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, pp. 90-91). The developmental advantages of a student's increasing awareness and integration of emotions allows for a student to exercise intentionality and control over those emotions, creating an environment where the depth and texture of emotions is valued and emphasized.

In the third vector, moving through autonomy toward interdependence, the benefits of necessitating adequate growth and development in the first two vectors begin to be made present. The three components of the third vector are emotional independence, instrumental independence, and interdependence (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 117). Having improperly or inadequately developed the ability to accept and manage emotions poses significant limitations to developing healthy emotional independence.

Many of the activities that Chickering and Reisser (1993) discuss on page 117 of *Education and Identity* lead to emotional independence, including separation from one's parents, an increased reliance on peers, and a growing sense of self-sufficiency and confidence, are dependent on students having some level of emotional acceptance and management. Developing instrumental independence entails having the "ability to carry

out activities on one's own and to be self sufficient, [as well as] the ability to leave one's place and function well in another" (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 132). Again, the foundational events of developing competencies play critical roles in students avoiding conflicts of personalities and confidence.

Interdependence, as described by Chickering and Reisser (1993), "cannot be experienced until a measure of independence has been achieved and a sense of one's place in the community and global society has been awakened" (p. 140). The development of interpersonal competence in the first vector directly affects a student's ability to grow those bonds to appropriately interacting with the community and global society. Again, if development in interpersonal competence is lacking or insufficient, a student's ability to connect with the greater environment in which a student exists is negatively affected.

In the fourth vector, developing mature interpersonal relationships, relationships are described by Chickering and Reisser (1993) as, "connections with others that have a profound impact on students' lives" (p. 145). Tolerance, an appreciation of differences, and the capacity for intimacy are critical aspects of developing mature interpersonal relationships (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 146). Students who have role models that share insights, who observe, firsthand, the struggles of others, and develop new ways to interact show greater abilities toward empathy and intimacy. Through it all, the key for students is maintaining autonomous identities as well as intimate relationships.

"Establishing identity. . . involves growing awareness of competencies, emotions and values, confidence in standing alone and bonding with others, and moving beyond intolerance toward openness and self-esteem" (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 173).

Chickering and Reisser (1993) discuss how the primary element of identity, when broken down, is the solid sense of self, which can be described using the following attributes:

“(1) comfort with body and appearance, (2) comfort with gender and sexual orientation, (3) sense of self in a social, historical, and cultural context, (4) clarification of self-concept through roles and life-styles, (5) sense of self in response to feedback from valued others, (6) self-acceptance and self-esteem, and (7) personal stability and integration” (p. 181).

In order for a student to develop along the vector of establishing identity, they must first have experienced development in the previous vectors. Due to the significance of the attributes developed in establishing identities, it is critical that students have sufficiently developed along the other vectors.

Once a student has begun the process of establishing an identity, the sixth vector, developing purpose, is engaged. The vector of developing purpose engages students in determining future goals and potential vocations by reflecting on personal interests, as well as deciphering what brings them fulfillment, assisting in students’ actualization of their full potential and excellence (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 212). Ultimately, developing purpose requires students to reflect on what goals and objectives are truly meaningful to them, what interpersonal and family commitments exist, and future plans are worth pursuing. It is in this vector that the ability to leave one place and function well in another, as described in the third vector, may be essential to the health and success of a student’s plans.

The final vector, developing integrity, requires students to reflect on core beliefs and values, in attempts to interpret their purposes and experiences through the foundations established by the earlier vectors (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 235). It requires students to take greater levels of responsibility for themselves and others, while

at the same time consistently applying thoughtful, ethical principles to situations and experiences encountered (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 236). Students in this vector engage in the personalizing of their values and building the frameworks for principles and commitments, as well as developing congruence and authenticity to values and selves. Essentially, students know who they are, what they value, can recognize and respect the differing values of others, and remain congruent and authentic.

### **STUDENT ASSESSMENT TECHNIQUES**

In order to assess the three students using the seven vectors, I developed a series of questions using the framework of the seven vectors themselves. I began by breaking the theory into the seven vectors, and then further broke down the vectors by including the critical and fundamental aspects of the theory as related to each vector. Once I had created a detailed outline that encompassed the theory of the seven vectors, I went through the framework that I had created and turned the fundamental aspects of the theory into descriptive questions, requiring detailed, descriptive answers from the students.

When assessing the three students, I was able to meet with two students in person and used Skype video to assess the third. I believe that the ability to see all three students (two in person) was essential and preferable, as it allowed for instant clarification of questions and the gauging of facial responses. It also allowed for a greater control of the environment, as their attention was uninterrupted and focused exclusively on the assessment at hand.

## TENTATIVE CONCLUSIONS

Through the assessment, it became clear that though the seven vectors focus primarily on development during the college years, development began before college and likely continues after the college years. Once the assessments had been completed, there were several notable similarities, as well as several notable differences, between the three students. One of the interesting differences between the three students came in developing competence.

Mr. Blue, who is the graduate student that returned to higher education, noted that his approach in acquiring information was through formal classroom study, in-class discussions, and structured assignments and projects. Mr. Green, the rising senior, preferred using online sources and means to acquire knowledge, and acknowledged having difficulties learning in formal, in-class and lecture methods. Ms. Red, on the other hand, noted that the optimal method of learning for her is by copying down everything she hears or reads, resulting in copious amounts of notes that are then reviewed and rewritten. All three, however, acknowledged that one of the most effective methods of learning were assignments that required students to apply the information to case studies or real-world examples.

There were several additional similarities between the three in the vector of developing competency. Each of the three students noted that increases in humanities, performing arts, and history began in the tenth or eleventh grade in high school, though the levels of interest and development differ between the three. Another similarity the three students shared was the value of athletics in their own development. All three students discussed the importance of building teamwork and camaraderie, the importance



of following the rules and promoting fairness, and the relationships and community that result from participation.

However, the realization of the value of athletics in physical and manual development came about at different stages for the three students. Mr. Blue, who participated in varsity athletics in high school and intramural athletics in college, did not realize the impact athletics had made on his life until he graduated college and entered the field of his profession. Mr. Green began to realize the importance that intramural athletics had in his development during his junior year in college, and is intent on participating in as many athletic opportunities as possible during his senior year. Ms. Red, on the other hand, has been highly involved in varsity athletics through high school and college. When discussing the impact of athletics in her life, she said that they have had significant impacts in relationship building, time management, intimacy, and receptiveness to criticism.

When asked about Breen and Whitaker's (1983) thirteen human relations and interpersonal skills (as summarized by Chickering and Reisser), the three students discussed the significance of leadership experiences in terms of interpersonal development using personal experiences of leading groups and teams. They spoke of the significance of community building and valuing individual abilities, of consensus building and task management. Each of them spoke of the significance of understanding emotions and developing emotional competence- their own and others'.

When asked about the second vector, managing emotions, the three students discussed three separate management techniques as the three students were at three separate development stages. Mr. Blue, being older, has had more experience in

accepting and permitting emotions to exist in proper means. He discussed a recent event in his workplace where, rather than suppressing emotions or letting them control him, he expressed his emotions appropriately while controlling them consciously.

Mr. Green, on the other hand, seemed to be in a developmental stage where he permitted emotions to exist, but had not yet found an appropriate balance or means of expression. He knew what his emotions were and what events caused certain responses, but recognized that he is still unable to control emotional responses from time to time. Ms. Red, the rising junior, admitted that she has a dichotomic existence in managing emotions. When discussing her emotional development, she described herself as being overly emotional and unable to control her emotions, but acknowledged that close friends describe her as being closed and reserved. Regardless of emotional development, all three students noted that their development progresses as experiences in managing and accepting their emotions are gained are refined.

The age separations of the three students began to actualize while responding to questions regarding the movement through autonomy toward interdependence. Mr. Blue's ability to separate from his parents had been impacted by the fact that he had begun his own family, having been married for four years already. Mr. Green's ability to separate from his parents has been impacted by the fact that he attends college 1,300 miles from home. Ms. Red's ability to separate from her parents has been impacted by the fact that she met other students who were also away from home and experiencing the same sentiments of homesickness. All three noted that their abilities to move through autonomy and establish interdependence had been impacted by the relationships they had

established, emphasizing the influence that friendships had on mental and emotional stability in college.

As the interviews began to address the development of mature relationships, the establishment of identity, the development of purpose, and the development of integrity of the three students, the background and developmental differences became more distinctive. Mr. Blue's responses to relationship building, purpose establishment, and integrity development revolved around the relationship he shares with his wife and the responsibilities of being a working adult in a professional field. As he is pursuing a vocation, his responses typically reflected the discernment process already completed rather than the current struggles of vocation selection.

Mr. Green, the rising senior, discussed throughout the last four vectors the value of relationship building in hopes of maintaining friendships once college ends. He reiterated that a sense of communication and commitment in intimate relationships provide a great sense of joy and connectivity. He admitted that, when it came to vocational development and selection, he was still very much in the process of vocational exploration. He has determined, through exploration and reflection, what field he is interested in pursuing, but does not have specific direction into that field as of yet.

Ms. Green, the rising junior, discussed the value of her faith and spirituality in building mature relationships and developing purpose and integrity. Though she has not engaged in formal vocational exploration, she has reflected on which courses and activities provide her the most joy and pleasure in life, recognizing that the field of pursuit will be one that provides enjoyment and peace in life. She discussed her hope

that her Christian values assist her in building and maintaining healthy relationships, and that people view her as genuine, kind, and authentic.

Though the three students varied in backgrounds and developmental stages, they shared similar sentiments of intimacy, authenticity, and value expression. All three students discussed the value of deep relationships founded on trust and communication. They discussed the impact that friends who give direct, honest feedback have on development. They discussed their innate desires to have people in their lives who share similar insights, interests, and values. They discussed their desires to be real and true, consistent and genuine. Finally, they discussed the hope of being seen as exuding strong values, as people who try to do the right thing, and as people who are committed to bettering themselves and their loved ones.

### **CRITIQUE OF THE THEORY**

There are logical, significant reasons as to why Chickering and Reisser's theory of the seven vectors has survived history to remain one of the preeminent theories in student development theory. The applicability of the theory is universal, as it allows for students of any identity to participate in development along the vectors. With the vector of 'establishing identity' such a stout cornerstone of the theory itself, no gender, race, socioeconomic status, sexual identity, or religion is exempt from the seven vectors.

Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, and Renn's (2010) summary of the seven vectors also describes the theory as "not only [helping] to explain the issues and concerns with which students are dealing but also suggests steps that student development educators can take to foster student growth" (p. 80). For a student affairs professional looking to encourage development in students, the seven vectors provides a framework in assessing

students in their current stage of development and guiding students to continue their development.

In terms of the students I assessed, the theory of the seven vectors of development allowed me to place each student in general stages and vectors of development. The assessments were concurrent with the theory put forth by Chickering and Reisser, that the ultimate goal of development is developing mature interpersonal relationships, discovering one's vocation, living with strong values and well-defined beliefs, and establishing integrity. All three students noted the importance of positive, intimate relationships in their lives, including family, friends, and professors.

Though the model has universal applicability, there were limitations and challenges that arose in applying the model. One such challenge to the model is noted in Evans et al.'s (2010) summary of the seven vectors, when stated that, "Significant development was identified during the first year of college" (p. 73). As noted in the assessments review, significant development occurs before students begin college and continues well after students leave college. Another issue that arose through my interviews, and pointed out by Evans et al. (2010), is that the seven vectors "[fails] to address the different motivational levels of students to grapple with issues or the process by which they accomplish developmental tasks" (p. 80). Though Chickering and Reisser intend the vectors to be sequential, development rarely occurs in sequence and often occurs at different paces. Thus, student affairs professionals may find it difficult to create programs and events that cater to students in antipodal stages of development. Though possible, the theory seems to be much more applicable in smaller units.

**RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROMOTING STUDENT DEVELOPMENT**

In light of what I have learned about student development theory, there are several recommendations to students and universities in promoting student development. Chickering and Reisser (1993) describe that institutions who provide students with opportunities to observe and engage in competency development creates skills that are transferrable to public, private, and professional settings (p. 75). Universities may foster competency development through programming events that promote developmental gains in humanities, performing arts, philosophy, and history (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 55). Requiring students to attend a set number of fine arts performances and exhibits during their time in college or holding forums and discussions in philosophy and history may encourage development. Even the completion of courses in the above-mentioned divisions for general curriculum requirements promotes the development of competencies in the areas.

“Advisers of student organizations can play a critical role in helping impassioned students decide how to turn a whirlwind of feelings into effective action” (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 109). The greatest role students and institutions can play in developing students’ ability to manage emotions is through intentional conversations promoting the awareness and integration of emotions. All three students noted that their emotional management was bettered through experiencing the range of emotions and having the ability to share their emotions with others. The value of reflecting on emotions to better understand the causes of and methods of management was also discussed by the three students.

As students move through autonomy toward interdependence and into developing mature interpersonal relationships, the significance of intentional conversations and programming becomes increasingly important. Operating programs that encourage or require students to make decisions and promote healthy means of establishing relationships develops autonomy as well as impactful connections. Using residential life staff to conduct intentional conversations promoting tolerance and appreciation, empathy and intimacy reinforces interdependence and maturity. As Chickering and Reisser (1993) noted, having trusted connections with others with whom students can share stories and reflect on past experiences has profound impacts the lives of students (p. 145), a sentiment shared by each of the students interviewed.

Providing services and organizations on campus that assist students in the exploration or selection of occupations, religious or spiritual directions, or political and sexual values aids students in establishing their identities (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 175). Having a visible career service center aids students in occupation exploration and commitment. Having a campus ministry that is open, welcoming, and accepting of all faiths, spiritualities, and backgrounds fosters a greater diversity and development of critical belief making systems on campus. Having a multitude of politically oriented organizations on campus provides opportunities for students to explore a variety of political stances and orientations. Finally, having active and supportive LGBT and multicultural awareness offices and organizations on campus provide opportunities for students to explore and develop their various identities and interests.

The effects of the various developmental opportunities mentioned above are felt when developing purpose, which Chickering and Reisser (1993) described as “an

increasing ability to be intentional, assess interest and options, clarify goals, make plans, and persist despite obstacles” (p. 209). With a greater diversity and availability of identity establishment options, opportunities to experience a wide variety of activities in competency development, the value of intentional conversations, and the emphasis on establishing quality relationships, institutions should have provided several quality avenues for students to explore potential vocations and careers. These same influences are impactful in the development of integrity. As Chickering and Reisser (1993) described, developing integrity involves a “movement toward responsibility for self and others and the consistent ability to thoughtfully apply ethical principles” (p. 236). Once a student has reached the vector of developing integrity, institutions have little effect on influencing the student any further.

As far as institutions are concerned in developing integrity, the greatest impact they can have is by providing effective and appropriate structures throughout the six preceding vectors. Moreover, this should be the ultimate goal in all areas of development for institutions: empowering students. After all, students will only be students for so long and the reality is that not every program and not every organization will affect every student equally. The better structured an institution is in promoting holistic student development creates greater possibilities that students will be advantageously affected during their collegiate experiences. With better-prepared and empowered students managing and directing their own lives becoming quality citizens in an ever-increasingly diverse and demanding global society.



## References

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