The Vermont Connection

January 2005

Political Competency: Understanding How College Students Develop Their Political Identity

Timothy O. Haskell

Kerry L. Fleming

Ray P.R. Quirolgico

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.uvm.edu/tvc

Part of the Higher Education Administration Commons

Political Competency: Understanding How College Students Develop Their Political Identity

Timothy O. Haskell, Kerry L. Fleming, & Ray P. R. Quirolgico

Constructing models of how students come to understand their identity is a hallmark of student development theory. Yet, there is little published research or institutional attention devoted to the examination of students' political identity development. In this article, the authors apply existing student development theories to this topic and describe ways that student affairs practitioners can facilitate student growth in this important dimension of adulthood.

There is clear consensus among higher education leaders that staff and faculty have a profound influence on the thoughts, behaviors, and actions of students (Astin, 1993). Understanding how all these functions come together to form personhood is a hallmark of student affairs practice. Our knowledge of student development is so critical that some of higher education's most notable leaders insist that we must enable students to develop a moral compass, "a set of internalized values and principles that always point in the right direction" (Schroeder, 1999, p. 1). While we expend considerable resources in this effort, the examination of politics and its role as one of the many dimensions of personal identity is almost completely absent in student affairs literature.

Civic engagement and democratic participation among college students seems to ebb and flow over the years. University presidents assert that this constant changing of the tide must end, and that education leaders need to do more to encourage active participation in the democratic process of our country (Ehrlich, 2000). Student affairs professionals are in a unique and powerful position to influence students' understanding of politics and increase their likelihood to participate in civic institutions.

This article addresses the concept of political identity development in the context of student development theory. It outlines ways to understand political identity development and calls for a competency that it is of paramount importance for student affairs professionals. Grassroots political mobilization efforts and the most recent voting trends suggest that students do not plan to continue standing on the sidelines much longer (Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement [CIRCLE], 2004). Student affairs professionals are in a unique position to become a part of this growing trend from its beginning.

Background

Developing awareness and competency in the political dimensions of students' lives is not often addressed. Issuing a strong indictment against graduate programs, Moore (1991) submitted that student affairs preparation programs are "woefully inadequate" in providing training on these issues. More than a decade later, Ehrlich and Hollander (2000) issued a stern warning to educators:

This country cannot afford to educate a generation that acquires knowledge without ever understanding how that knowledge can benefit society or how to influence democratic decision making … we [must] take responsibility for helping [students] realize the values and skills of our democratic society and their need to claim ownership of it. (p. 1)

Few would disagree with the value of students' connection to the larger social institutions that shape their lives. This provokes an important question: How has higher education managed to overlook such an important responsibility? Presenting empirical evidence to suggest that there is one reason or set of reasons is difficult. The literature presents several different explanations. While some researchers suggest this may be because some professionals feel pressure to adopt a certain ideology (Leo, 2002), others argue for the need to stay away from favoring any political ideology

Timothy Haskell earned degrees from the University of Missouri and Indiana University. He currently works at Santa Clara University as Assistant Director of the Center for Student Leadership and Orientation Coordinator.

Kerry L. Fleming earned degrees from the University of Nebraska- Kearney and graduated from the Indiana University HESA program in 2003. She currently serves as a Coordinator for Greek Life at the University of Missouri-Columbia.

Ray Quirolgico earned degrees at The University of Virginia before graduating from the University of Vermont HESA program in 1993. He is currently the Director of Residence Life at The University of San Francisco.

(Bromwich, 1992), and still other researchers assert that any labels at all subvert free and open discussion (Edelstein, 1992).

Student affairs professionals cannot be excused from this effort. Practitioners must identify real ways to understand how students' identities shape political perspectives and use that knowledge to assist them in their own learning. The most recent data on students' interest in politics (Volpe, 2003) and actual voting participation are nearing record levels (CIRCLE, 2004). "Higher education has an unprecedented opportunity to influence democratic knowledge, dispositions, and habits of the heart that graduates carry with them into the public square" (Ehrlich, 2000, p. 1). If research and scholarly discussion are indicators, few acknowledge or accept the role student affairs professionals play in political identity development. Practitioners are standing on the margins while students are eagerly searching for avenues of involvement and understanding.

The interest and activity surrounding the 2004 US presidential election reflects trends in research on *Millennials*—those students graduating high school and enrolling in college from 2000 and beyond (Howe & Strauss, 2000). These students are likely to have higher levels of civic engagement than their peers in the previous decade and are more inclined to participate directly in activities and groups that will create immediate social change (Howe & Strauss). Helping students navigate and understand the civic and social institutions that shape their lives should be a fundamental responsibility of student affairs professionals. Political identity is part and parcel of a greater sense of self and a critical component in how students make meaning.

Students are well served if we invest earnest attention to the context of political messages and how they are conveyed to students; serendipity should no longer be an option (Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, & Stephens, 2003). Educators are invited to earnestly consider the impact of their courses, programs, and dialogues and to be bridge builders for students. Helping students negotiate meaning from their experiences and how those influence personal identity is part of a critical role for student affairs practitioners:

To reconnect college students with political affairs and traditional forms of political involvement, faculty and program advisers need to help students see the links between their direct service activities, personal commitments, and lifestyle choices on the one hand and related institutional and policy questions on the other. (Colby et al., 2003, p. 19)

As bridge builders, higher education professionals are in a powerful position to clarify meaning, encourage action, and challenge prevailing assumptions about the world. The student affairs profession lacks a cogent model that specifically addresses political identity development, yet the intersection of several landmark student development theories provides a context for this work.

Review of Existing Theories

The development of political identity is a personal endeavor. While trained to utilize student development theory in a variety of contexts, student affairs professionals often overlook politics as a dimension of personhood. Understanding how students develop this dimension of self is not as daunting as it may appear. Tools for practice are at the immediate disposal of student affairs practitioners. The convergence of student development theories provides a framework when confronted with the realities of discussing politics with students. Three examples are presented here.

Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development (1971)
Moving through natural stages, students begin to understand and negotiate values-based situations in different ways. In the pre-conventional stage, students see only moral absolutes. Students begin to identify with the values of their environment in the conventional stages (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). Finally, the two perspectives merge in the post-conventional stage to inform beliefs based on principles (Evans et al., 1998).

Perry's Theory of Intellectual and Ethical Development (1970)
Perry asserts that intellectual and ethical development are shaped by experiences. Students will find themselves at several different positions of development during their lifetime. Dualism, like Kohlberg's pre-conventional stage, identifies problems in absolutes. The second position, multiplicity, recognizes that a right answer may not be available for a complex problem. Finally, students at the relativism position may choose to not answer a problem in absolute terms, arguing that research on both sides of an issue is needed before a conclusion is drawn (Evans et al., 1998).

Chickering and Reisser's Seven Vectors (1993)
As students develop reasoning and thinking skills, decisions about personal values are made (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Developing competence is a critical stage when students need reinforcement and praise for studying issues of interest to them. Growth and development occur in the multiple dimensions of the vectors.

Application of Theory to the Political Dimension

Kohlberg's theory of moral development (1971) suggests that as students develop, they move from seeing only moral absolutes where nuanced political topics may be difficult to understand and discuss to identifying with the values of their environment in the conventional level (Evans et al., 1998). In these stages, students might adopt political dispositions that are comfortable and convenient given their living situation with family, friends, or residence hallmates. In the post-conventional level, each individual student may be able to clearly define positions on issues that inform her or his choices in various elections.

Similarly, in Perry's theory of intellectual and ethical development (1970), students move through a position of moral absolutes (i.e., dualism) to a point of considering multiple perspectives (i.e., multiplicity) (Evans et al., 1998). In the last position (i.e., relativism), students may engage in political rallies to obtain more information about political parties or individual candidates in an attempt to sort through multiple truths and different positions to come to their own conclusions on issues.

There are many implications for political identity development when considering Chickering and Reisser's seven vectors (1993). As students develop competence in reasoning and thinking skills, they can make decisions based on personal values (Chickering & Reisser). As students identify with salient political issues, some may have difficulty accepting opposing perspectives. Moving through autonomy toward interdependence is a critical development stage for students negotiating political realities. Students developing in this vector are able to depend less on the dispositions of their parents and pre-college environment and, instead, depend more on a wide range of opinions and are likely to acknowledge the need and value for dissent (Chickering & Reisser). This often leads to the development of mature interpersonal relationships with others of similar ideologies and perhaps even opposing ideology. Developing integrity is a point where a sense of balance and engagement with the civic life of the community is most likely to occur. For political identity, this is likely to be connected with developing purpose, where students struggle to find purpose for their commitment and passion (Chickering & Reisser). Further exploration of political beliefs and perspectives may be needed.

Student development models and theories speak to the needs of different populations. These tools should also inform student affairs practice, especially those theories that address individual identity development in the contexts of social activism, affiliation with communities, and the development of group identity. These theoretical perspectives include, but are not limited to, Cross' (1991) model of psychological nigrescence (Evans et al., 1998), Cass' (1979) model of homosexual identity formation, and Fassinger's (1998) inclusive model (Fassinger, 1998). Student experiences are often not as salient as they are presented in theoretical discussions. Nonetheless, this examination of theory application provides appropriate boundaries to begin considering how students understand political issues, which are often connected to other personal identity structures.

A Conceptualized Application of Theories

To fully understand how these theories relate to identity development, a conceptualization of theory, identity, and experience is presented (Figure 1). The common feature in each theory is that experiences influence identity as individuals move through life experiences. Students' personal upbringing (family, socioeconomic status, region of the country, etc.), K-12 educational experience (instruction on U.S. history and civic education), and higher education (likelihood of campus to support multiple ideas, academic freedom, student dissent, etc.) are all factors that play a role in how students interpret identity trigger events. The confluence of these factors shape students' understanding and affinity towards political engagement. This is precisely why the conceptualization of political identity development relies upon multiple developmental theories to inform the continuum.

Finally, to truly understand how identity peaks in undergraduate years, one must consider the context and climate of the college environment, the political disposition of faculty and staff, and other cultural variables. Each of these factors

influences how college students understand their role in politics and how they will come to understand the issues that matter most. Colby et al. (2003) concisely explained:

Experiences outside of the classroom can change students' frameworks for interpreting reality, their sense of what is important, and their confidence in their own ability to affect the world around them, and their sense of who they are and who they want to be. (p. 224)

The student affairs practitioner often serves as principle negotiator in this progression. The greatest advances in student learning are made when environments support and reward it (Kuh, 2000). In that spirit, the level of student attention and engagement with political activities and involvement is likely to be related to the supportive climate of the campus to do so. Do campus leaders actively support peaceful student protests that advocate unpopular positions, lectures from professors or political leaders that call attention to controversial issues, and encourage students to broaden their understanding of current events and opinion? Or are events of this nature avoided because the issues are too dangerous for endorsement and engagement would prohibit student affairs practitioners from carrying on with something considered safer work?

Conclusion

The type and quality of transactions students have with agents of socialization on campus--faculty, staff, and students-- affect the way they perceive and understand activities related to learning and personal development (Kuh, 2000). If students are not engaged in discussions of political and civic issues, they are less likely to understand their own sense of identity or participate in events to inform it. As stewards of personal development on campus, it is incumbent upon student affairs professionals to develop competencies in this area. It is very difficult to separate politics from other genuinely personal issues, including sexual identity, personal morality, racial and cultural background, and religious disposition. It is not possible to extract one from the other. Politics are symbolic and representative of multiple salient identities that each student possesses. Proficiency in this area must be as markedly important as any other.

References

Astin, A. W. (1993). *What matters most in college? Four critical years revisited*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Bromwich, D. (1992). *Politics by other means: Higher education and group thinking*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Chickering, A. W., & Reisser, L. (1993). *Education and identity* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement. (2004). *Turnout of under-25 voters up sharply*. Retrieved November 11, 2004, from http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/Release_1824final.pdf

Colby, A., Ehrlich, T., Beaumont, E., & Stephens, J. (2003). *Educating citizens: Preparing America's undergraduates for lives of moral and civic responsibility*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Edelstein, M., Ph.D. (1992, Summer). Ethics, education, and political correctness [Electronic version]. *Issues in Ethics, 5*(2).

Ehrlich, T., Hollander, E. (1999). *Presidents' declaration on the civic responsibility of higher education*. Retrieved November 11, 2004, from http://www.compact.org/presidential/declaration.html

Evans, N. J., Forney, D. S., & Guido-DiBrito, F. (1998). *Student development in college: Theory, research, and practice*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Fassinger, R. E. (1998). Lesbian, gay, and bisexual identity and student development theory. In R. L. Sanlo (Ed.), *Working with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender college students: A handbook for faculty and administrators* (pp. 13-22). Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

Howe, N., & Strauss, W. (2000). *Millennials rising: The next great generation*. New York: Vintage books.

Kuh, G. D. (2000). Understanding campus environments. In M. J. Barr & M. K. Desler (Eds.), *The handbook of student affairs administration* (2nd ed., pp. 50-65). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Leo, J. (2002, September 23). The absent professors. *U.S. News and World Report*, 14.

Moore, P. L. (Ed.) (1991, Fall). Managing the political dimension of student affairs. *New directions for student services, 55*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Schroeder, C. C. (1999). Finding our moral compass. *About Campus, 4*(4), 1.

Volpe, J. D. (2003, October 20). *IOP Fall Survey--U.S. college students: Politically untapped*. Retrieved November 17, 2003, from http://www.iop.harvard.edu/pdfs/survey/fall_2003.pdf

Figure 1. Personal identity development is understood through the lenses of student development theory. There are multiple levels and dimensions of identity. The sum of trigger events in the context of other development factors (i.e. upbringing, college environment, etc.) informs political identity. The philosophy may stay the same through trigger events, but multiple perspectives inform final decision.