

Developmental Tasks of College Students

Ronnie Prevost

Associate Professor of Christian Education
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

Developmental psychologists have historically been very vague concerning age parameters. They rightly caution against generalizations and assigning a particular developmental task/need to one specific age. Of course, the reason for this is that persons are affected and developmentally molded somewhat by their own unique experiences.

The caution of developmental psychologists is well taken by those who would minister to college students. One reason is that which is generally held. However, in dealing with college students two other important words of caution must be sounded. First, the traditional college student (single, between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two) is at a transitional developmental stage (late adolescence blending into young adulthood). A transitional period is, at best, critical, and easily lends itself to confusion as well as regression. Second, the non-traditional college student may come from quite literally nearly all developmental age groups, especially the adult sub-groups (young, median, and senior adults). Campus ministries aimed solely toward late adolescents and young (single) adults will usually disinterest and even alienate most non-traditional college students because of the developmental gap.

For the purposes of this article the focus will be primarily on the developmental tasks of the traditional college student. However, there is, and will most assuredly continue to be, a rise in the number of non-traditional college students. For this reason the particular developmental tasks of other adult groups will be at least enumerated.

College students are, in most situations, referred to as adults. However, the vast majority of traditional college students will begin their college careers still manifesting primarily the traits of late adolescence.

(This is not intended to be perjorative, merely an observation and an acknowledgement of this transitional period. Also, there may be many valid explanations for this including natural development, protective environments, etc.)

In *Psychology of Adolescence*, Garrison responds to Havighurst's general developmental task statements with specific late adolescent tasks in this manner:

1. achieving an appropriate dependence-independence pattern: establishing self as an independent person; making own decisions concerning self
2. achieving an appropriate affectional pattern: building a strong affectional bond with another person
3. achieving a sense of belonging: accepting an adult role in different groups
4. acquiring an appropriate sex role: becoming attached to a member of the opposite sex: preparing to accept future sex role
5. developing intellectual skills and concepts: developing intellectual, language, and motor skills and understanding for assuming civic responsibility
6. developing conscience, morality, and a set of values: acquiring standards and ethical concepts: acquiring a philosophy of life.¹

Although lists of specific developmental tasks will differ somewhat from writer to writer, this list is fairly representative of what one may consider a consensus. In general terms Erikson describes adolescence as a time of struggle between identity and role confusion.²

Taking into account these tasks and struggles one can begin to appreciate the tremendous struggle "leaving home for college" poses for the late adolescent. Even for the student who is living at home there is much more a sense of entry into "the world" with its plethora of decisions to be made, roles to be filled, responsibilities to be assumed, and values to be chosen, developed, and characterized.

The traditional college student is frequently referred to as a young adult. Lucien E. Coleman, Jr.

describes the gradual transition from adolescent to "full-blown" adulthood in the following manner:

1. leaving the family of one's childhood
2. establishing a beachhead in the adult world.³

This general description has several specific implications. Leaving the family of one's childhood involves literal separation. Entering marriage, college, or the military will most often lead to this physical separation (and this detachment will sometimes be of considerable distance). The discipline of day to day living will be an adjustment for most young adults not only because of the absence of familiar outside motivators (i.e. parental demands to get up in the morning, keep their room clean, eat their "veggies", etc.), but also simply because they are surrounded by a new environment in general.

Reflective of the physical separation from the family of one's childhood is the task of young adults to develop their own particular set of values. These values may or may not be in keeping with all or some of the values of the family of their childhood. Nevertheless, these are the values by which they will live their lives as separate young adults. Obviously, young adults respond differently to this task. Some will seek to completely devoid their lives of what they perceive as the oppressive "baggage" with which they feel they have been encumbered by their families. Some will never examine those values in order to make the values of their families truly theirs as adults. Still others will hold to the values of their families while examining them and other value systems in order to produce a value system that is uniquely theirs.

Inherent in all these descriptions of developmental tasks is that of forming and adjusting to one's self-perception. We all deal with the maturing process differently. Even the business of moving from adolescence to adulthood is a part of that maturing process. In the traditional college student this may be verbalized thusly: "I'm not a kid anymore." Reactions to this realization vary from pride and self-assurance to fear and tremb-

ling. Individual reactions are normally affected by one's self-esteem as well as one's impression of adulthood in particular and the maturing process in general.

There are, however, others than the traditional college students of which the campus minister should be aware. There has been a rise in the number of non-traditional college students the likes of which has not been seen except in the influx of veterans entering college under the G.I. Bill after WWII. These students include retirees, widows and widowers, unemployed persons seeking new (and more marketable) skills, married and single-again women looking for bases from which to re-enter the work force, persons whose prospects for upward mobility at their current career level may be enhanced by their having earned college credit or a college degree, etc. All of these will have needs which the campus minister can and should address. The implication is that the campus minister should be concerned and familiar with their developmental tasks as well as those of the traditional college student.

One focus of the developmental tasks of adults is that of the vocation. By "vocation" we mean that activity in which one spends the plurality of one's time and by which one maintains one's primary identity. Obviously, young, middle, and senior adults will tend to approach this aspect of their lives from different perspectives. In perusing the above list of non-traditional student types, evident is the fact that even within a given specific developmental group there may be radically differing tasks in dealing with one's vocation. Young and old alike may feel trapped or even victimized by their vocation. Add to this the combined pressures of school and their "job" and one can quite easily see the frustration with which a great number of these are working. Even those who are experiencing fulfillment in the college setting will find themselves taxed by the double or triple lives they feel they are leading. In any case dealing with vocational identity is a major task for the non-traditional college student.

Another focus of the developmental tasks of adults is that of the family. By this term we mean not only

family in the more traditional sense, but also that group of persons with which one most closely identifies oneself emotionally and to which one resorts as the primary source of emotional and psychological strength. Here again, specific developmental tasks dealing with this focus cut across the age spectrum. Divorce, separation, and death all result in a disruption of family life. However, even the simple fact that a parent is in college (whether for retooling or for first time entry or re-entry into the job market) can cause considerable disruption in both family routine and relationships. Concern with specific family responsibility and/or guilt over past and present family relationships are often issues with which these may struggle.

The final focus of the developmental tasks of adults with which we will deal is that of social relationships. changes in either vocation or family often result in changes of social relationships. Single-again persons will often find themselves in a kind of social limbo in which friends of "the couple" are struggling with relationships with the individuals who comprised "the couple." Additionally, many non-traditional college students simply feel socially displaced. Not only are they possibly surrounded by those other than their normal peer group (especially if they are day students), but also those who work often find little time for developing social relationships outside the family. Again, many will thrive on the challenge and variety found in developing social relationships as non-traditional college students.

One may review the developmental needs and tasks of both traditional and non-traditional college students and question the sanity of one who would seek to minister to such a variety of persons and potential problems. In fact, the maze of these tasks seems almost impenetrable. Ministry to these students begins simply with an awareness of these tasks and their nearly infinite possible combinations within any one individual.

The needs reflected by these tasks are primarily relational. College students need to learn how to relate to God, to others, and to themselves. They need to understand the dynamics of intimate relationships and

how to adjust to change in the world and in themselves. They need to learn the process of valuing and how to deal with guilt when those values are violated.

These needs are not often approached in the college classroom. The addressing of these needs is a vital goal of campus ministry and a very real challenge.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Karl C. Garrison and Karl C. Garrison, Jr., **Psychology of Adolescence**, 7th ed., (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1975), p.11.
2. James W. Fowler, **Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning**, (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), p. 77.
3. Lucien E. Coleman, Jr., **Understanding Today's Adults**, (Nashville: Convention Press, 1982), pp. 92-95.