

## **The duh... and the what!?!**

By Elliott Wolf

Q. E. D.

Duke students are here not only to be educated; we also need to be “developed.”

So says the presence of hundreds of Student Affairs employees trained specifically to “develop” us. They are trained to nurture our “psychosocial and identity” needs, with respect to “cognitive-structural” considerations and “typology.”<sup>1</sup>

These subfields are the three major components of a rather obscure field called “student development theory,” situated somewhere near the crossroads of sociology, psychology and babysitting. Per a division-wide mandate instituted in 2004, most salaried employees in Student Affairs hold Master’s degrees that include training in student development theory, and for many it was the primary focus of their postgraduate education.

Its tenets have been cited as justification for the comical (but ultimately nauseating) state of undergraduate judicial policy, the policies surrounding whom Student Affairs can hire, the programs and services provided by Student Affairs and much more. In a more gratuitous example of its application, Residence Life and Housing Services told Sigma Phi Epsilon to rename their “Dorm Wars” competition “Hall Brawl,” because the word “Dorm” wasn’t considered sufficiently welcoming.

So what is this “discipline?” What’s so great about it that allows it to define the extracurricular relationship between the institution and its students?

As far as I can tell, it’s not really a “discipline.”

The scholarship seems no more rigorous than that found in Wal-Mart’s collection of self-help books (disclaimer: I’m speculating; I’ve never actually read a self-help book from Wal-Mart). It strives to compartmentalize and characterize various stages of college student development, but fails to provide any meaningful guidance beyond what one might learn in the course of growing up and experiencing college itself.

After checking out 15 volumes on the subject from Perkins and scouring the Internet, I’ve reduced student development theory to two components: (1) tautology, or statements that are either repetitious of already widespread ideas or otherwise very obviously true, and (2) absurdity, or statements that simply don’t make sense.

In other words, student development theory consists of the “duh... ” and the “what!?!” To demonstrate, each of the following quotes comes from a book, scholarly article or website on student development theory. Source references and additional quotes are posted at <http://www.duke.edu/~egw4/>:

On the “duh... ” side, student development theory stresses that, “on any number of campuses, on any given day, students engage in a variety of acts.”<sup>2</sup>

Recognizing that students are somewhat rational beings, one guide states, “satisfaction of

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<sup>1</sup> Categories taken from: Evans, Nancy; Forney, Deanna; Guido-DiBrito, Florence. *Student Development in College: Theory, Research and Practice*. Jossey-Bass, 1998.

<sup>2</sup> Hamrick, Florence; Evans, Nancy; Schuh, John. *Foundations of Student Affairs Practice: How Philosophy, Theory, and Research Strengthen Educational Outcomes*. Wiley & Sons, 2002. Page 181.

one's own needs and occasionally the needs of others determine actions."<sup>4</sup>

And as anyone who's been dumped can attest, "individuals seek acceptance and friendship among peers; adults seek a mate. Thwarted needs for belonging and love are considered to be a primary source of maladjustment."<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, "the pursuit of lifelong learning further extends the educational sphere into a person's entire life."<sup>6</sup>

On the "what!?! " side: "with temporizing, cognitive development is essentially 'put on hold'; a plateau is maintained. Escape, another deflection, involves an abandonment of responsibility characterized by alienation. Retreat, the third deflection, involves a temporary retreat to dualism."

Almost every article or chapter argued one of two highly debatable conclusions: (1) that student affairs staff are integral to a particular aspect of student life, and (2) that student affairs staff are as important to the educational process as every other institutional component, including the faculty.

That this is the thrust of student development theory is not surprising. Placing student development "research" in a bureaucratic context, one article noted, "the very existence of the student affairs profession may be at stake if we are unable to justify what we do."<sup>7</sup>

But having a basis in the "duh..." and the "what!?! " doesn't exactly bode well for the future of the profession, or for Student Affairs' ability to adequately cater to the needs of students at Duke. Perhaps this very consideration prompted President Brodhead and Provost Lange to appoint Steve Nowicki, an accomplished researcher and former Dean of the Natural Sciences, as Dean of Undergraduate Education.

The inclusion of Student Affairs under Nowicki's responsibility reflects the importance of non-faculty employees to the undergraduate experience. Students need help planning events, navigating the institution, dealing with crises, finding jobs and making sure we don't cause bodily harm to one another. Burdened with teaching and research, faculty members are often unable or unwilling to help in such capacities.

But thankfully, Nowicki's appointment decreases the likelihood that those functions will be approached as exercises in "student development."

He just has to make sure that the people who want a job at Duke helping students aren't forced to study "higher education leadership," relearning the blatantly obvious and regurgitating the patently absurd to get a master's degree in student affairs.

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<sup>3</sup> Evans, Nancy; Forney, Deanna; Guido-DiBrito, Florence. *Student Development in College: Theory, Research and Practice*. Jossey-Bass, 1998. Page 133.

<sup>4</sup> Barr, Margaret; Desler, Mary. *The Handbook of Student Affairs Administration*. Josey-Bass, 2000.

<sup>5</sup> Central Michigan University. *Intro to Student Development Theory*. Available online: [http://www.reslife.cmich.edu/rama/index.php?section=Experienced\\_Staff&category=Intro\\_To\\_Student\\_Development\\_Theory](http://www.reslife.cmich.edu/rama/index.php?section=Experienced_Staff&category=Intro_To_Student_Development_Theory)

<sup>6</sup> Hamrick, Florence; Evans, Nancy; Schuh, John. *Foundations of Student Affairs Practice: How Philosophy, Theory, and Research Strengthen Educational Outcomes*. Wiley & Sons, 2002. Page 217.

<sup>7</sup> Barr, Margaret; Desler, Mary. *The Handbook of Student Affairs Administration*. Josey-Bass, 2000. Page 264