

January 2014

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### Recommended Citation

Redmond, Audrey Claire (2014) "Student Affairs' Role in Helping First-Year Students Move Towards Self-Authorship," *The Vermont Connection*: Vol. 35 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/tvc/vol35/iss1/11>

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## Student Affairs' Role in Helping First-Year Students Move Towards Self-Authorship

Audrey Claire Redmond

*Baxter Magolda, King, Taylor, and Wakefield (2012) found that undergraduate students underwent developmental changes that reveal a gradual decrease in reliance on authority over the course of their first academic year. The students shared stories during their interviews that gave little insight as to how or why such developmental changes occurred. How and by what means are these students moving away from reliance on authority and towards self-definition? What role – if any – can student affairs professionals play in this movement? Simply knowing that first-year students move away from a reliance on authority and towards self-definition is a good start. Student affairs professionals must also be aware of strategies and practices that best support students in such growth. If student affairs professionals have better awareness of what first-year students might deem helpful in their development towards self-definition and self-authorship, then they can better support their students in such growth and be stronger practitioners in the field.*

*“Most encountered a crossroads during their twenties at which they learned reliance on external authority came into conflict with their growing internal voices. Getting through that crossroads, or bringing their internal sense of self to the foreground and moving external influence to the background, was essential for them to become authors of their own lives” –Marcia B. Baxter Magolda, 2003*

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Undergraduate students have the potential to significantly develop their identities over the course of their first year. One such area of development is in the direction of achieving self-authorship, Baxter Magolda's (2004) pinnacle of self-development. Self-authorship is the “developmental capacity to internally define one's own identity, relationships, and beliefs” (Taylor, 2008, p. 215), and is rarely achieved during one's undergraduate tenure. Steps can be made, however, through Baxter Magolda's model of self-authorship while in college, and studies show that

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movement does indeed occur. Baxter Magolda, King, Taylor, and Wakefield (2012) studied first year students to examine what progress was made in the direction of self-authorship and found that most students moved away from reliance on authority and toward *Self-Definition*. It is the first phase of self-authorship, and in its achievement, students are able to move into the second phase of self-authorship, *Becoming the Author of One's Life*, followed by the third phase, *Internal Foundations*, until, finally, self-authorship is fully achieved.

Baxter Magolda et al. (2012) revealed that first-year students moved away from reliance on authority and toward self-definition as they entered a period of crisis and uncertainty in one's ways of knowing and came out on the other side unscathed. This piece of the developmental process is known as *The Crossroads*. The student narratives produced via the study "reveal[ed] the challenges students encountered but contain[ed] little detailed commentary on support they received in developing their internal voices" (Baxter Magolda, et al., 2012, p. 431). As a result of the lack of research on exactly how students enter The Crossroads, little is known about this developmental process (Pizzolato, 2005). Without knowing how students enter into and successfully navigate The Crossroads, it remains difficult for student affairs professionals to predict, observe, or assist such movement.

### **Achieving Self-Definition as a First-Year Student**

Many undergraduate students enter their first year of college with a strong reliance on authority and little idea of their own, internal voice. "They often see knowledge as certain and accept authority's knowledge claims uncritically" (Baxter Magolda & King, 2007, p. 493), which can result in an inability to know oneself and one's beliefs in any genuine, definitive way. Should a student remain reliant on authority and fail to develop their own sense of self, there may be negative implications both academically and socially. Baxter Magolda and King (2007) noted, "self-authorship is a foundation for achieving many college learning outcomes" (p. 491), and therefore a lack of progress in the journey towards self-authorship can be academically stagnating. Socially, students must be able to communicate with their peers speaking from their own perspective and with an awareness of who they are. To author one's process of feeling, thinking, and socially relating is to be a functioning, successful adult (Baxter Magolda & King, 2007), and is thus a pivotal social piece of the undergraduate experience.

Deserting a comfortable framework of knowing in favor of self-work, questioning, and developing a new structure can feel like a daunting task. Abandoning a reliance on authority and shifting to self-definition seems like an advantageous and beneficial move for all students to work towards, but it may not come naturally or simply for all students. Reliance on authority may be the only system of knowing previously experienced by a student, and furthermore, it may feel comfortable

and easy. External pressure from family members may also inhibit students from entering The Crossroads. Pizzolato and Ozaki (2007) noted that students might feel pressure to fulfill a tradition or hope of someone important in their lives, even if they cannot envision themselves taking over or enjoying the career paths or roles of their parents.

Despite potential barriers to achieving self-definition, many first-year students are naturally inclined to move away from reliance on authority and towards an entrance into The Crossroads. Pizzolato and Ozaki (2007) explained, “students at The Crossroads begin to feel uncomfortable with their ways of knowing and seek ways to alter their epistemologies in ways that will allow them to better cope with the complexity required by the situation” (p. 202). Buesseri and Rose-Krasnor (2008) noted that, while such discomfort and movement may be natural, “less well understood is the significance of subjective experiences in activities in relation to personal and interpersonal growth” (p. 425). How exactly are students entering and moving through The Crossroads and deciding what to believe and how to build identity? The pivotal question for student affairs professionals becomes: can we help facilitate this discomfort in students’ ways of knowing and play a role in their entrance into The Crossroads? If so, how?

### **What Students Say**

To better understand the role of student affairs professionals in facilitating students’ entrance into The Crossroads, it is pivotal to identify student perspectives on how such growth has been achieved. Unfortunately, little research has been dedicated to exactly how students move into and through The Crossroads, and even less has specifically focused on the role that student affairs professionals may play. What is known, however, is that “students at The Crossroads begin to feel uncomfortable with their ways of knowing and seek ways to alter their epistemologies in ways that will allow them to better cope with the complexity required by the situation” (Pizzolato & Ozaki, 2007, p. 202). With this knowledge in mind, student affairs professionals can begin to infer the types of discomfort that might assist student movement into The Crossroads by listening to our students. What have students identified as moments of “intense intrapersonal tension” (Pizzolato & Ozaki, 2007, p. 202) — particularly in regards to their views of authority figures — during their first year of college, and were they able to articulate a connection between that dissonance and growth?

When students begin their first year of college, “they often see knowledge as certain and accept authority’s knowledge claims uncritically” (Baxter Magolda & King, 2007, p. 493). The shift into The Crossroads begins to occur as they begin to take responsibility for selecting their own belief system and designing their identity (Pizzolato & Ozaki, 2007). There are several means by which this growth

can transpire. First, out-of-class experiences were cited as a primary source of experiencing intrapersonal tension and working towards a better understanding of the self. Considering that achieving self-authorship is a reasonable goal for many of today's college students, Kuh (1995) noted:

Many different out-of-class experiences have the potential to contribute to valued outcomes of college ... Among the more powerful experiences were those that demanded sustained effort to complete various tasks as students interacted with people from different groups and peers from different backgrounds. (p. 145)

A student in Kuh's (1995) study explained the value of out-of-class experiences precisely when they noted, "it is funny that we are talking about things outside the classroom because I feel like that is the place that I have done most of my growing" (p. 123). These experiences can take the form of participation in clubs, activities, leadership positions, social settings, or work scenarios. Such opportunities provide students with a chance to interact with a variety of individuals in new ways, and such experiences can create the level of engagement and discomfort necessary to promote movement away from reliance on authority.

Involvement in service learning has also been identified as a means by which students potentially enter into The Crossroads during their first year of college. "Involvement in service learning may lead to the opportunities for skill development, value expression, and resource building that are required for the eventual selection of adaptive personal, academic, and career-related goals" (Buesseri & Rose-Krasnor, 2008, p. 426), and identity development is fostered through better understanding one's own goals. Through service learning, students can realize the role that they are capable of playing in making their communities stronger, safer, and happier. They can comprehend their ability to help others, and, in doing so, may realize their own proficiency as young adults functioning in the world on their own. The experience of service learning can challenge authority by welcoming students to develop their own values and significance (Baxter Magolda & King, 2007), and can thus provide the level of intrapersonal tension necessary to possibly enter into The Crossroads.

Students also cited informal contact with faculty and staff members as contributing to their movement away from authority dependence. Such interactions give students the opportunity to shift their understanding of where authority comes from, and to "challenge this authority by inviting learners to develop their own purposes and meaning through conversation" (Baxter Magolda & King, 2007, p. 493). Informal contact allows students to develop their own inner sense of authority, which is separate from but ideally equal to those in higher positions than themselves. Students said "informal faculty-student contact beyond the classroom fostered feelings of affirmation, confidence, and self-worth, particularly for women, and contributed to knowledge acquisition and the development

of academic and personal skills” (Kuh, 1995, p. 146). Such interactions, while often infrequent, can carry significant weight in the process of first year students entering *The Crossroads* and moving towards self-definition.

### Next Steps for Student Affairs Professionals

Knowing that the “ability to author one’s own thinking, feeling, and social relating is inherent in successful functioning in adult life” (Baxter Magolda & King, 2007, p. 492), student affairs professionals should consider the practices identified by students as helpful in reaching a point of internal questioning, and contemplate the role that they might play in fostering self-definition in the students they work with. If one of higher education’s goals is that of transforming higher education to place the development of self as central, student affairs professionals have the chance to institute changes in their interactions with students that more successfully promote self-authorship. Baxter Magolda and King (2007) suggested “the potential for promoting self-authorship in college far exceeds the degree to which it has been prevalent among college students” (p. 493); the possibilities for supporting student development are vast and exciting. Pizzolato (2005) reminded us that “*The Crossroads* may be externally induced through programming, interventions, and reforms related to common collegiate experiences” (Pizzolato, 2005, p. 624), and we might therefore feel inspired by the potential influence we could have as professionals.

While additional research must be conducted to fully understand the influence and specificities of student affairs professionals on first-year student development, several strategies seem to promote entrance into *The Crossroads* and towards self-definition. One strategy for student affairs professionals to employ is to avoid providing students with base formulas for success. During their first year of college, many students are provided the unique challenges of navigating living with a roommate, balancing schoolwork and social time, and residing independently from their families, all for the first time. Such transition can play a key role in developing self-definition, as “experimentation and exploration may be particularly salient during the period of ‘emerging adulthood’” (Buesseri & Rose-Krasnor, 2008, p. 426). While watching students work through such transitions, it can feel tempting to offer solutions to successfully navigating a difficult time. Student affairs professionals must try to avoid offering structured solutions, though, and should find alternative ways of supporting their students. Since “colleges and universities tend to provide so many formulas for success” (Pizzolato & Ozaki, 2007, p. 197), realizing one’s own capacity for developing solutions is difficult when answers are simply offered. While there remains value in structured and organized activities, “a range of less structured, daily activities may be venues for positive development” (Buesseri & Rose-Krasnor, 2008, p. 427). We must provide

students with a balance of challenge and support, not formulaic solutions, to assist their entrance into The Crossroads.

Student affairs professionals can benefit from becoming better listeners, particularly when advising first-year students. Genuine listening demonstrates an element of equality between professional and student. When students realize that they are being taken seriously, they come to see that a positive conception of self is vital to their knowledge construction (Baxter Magolda, 2003). Pizzolato and Ozaki (2007) highlighted an advisor who always began her sessions by simply listening to students' stories about how they had landed in a place of academic or social difficulty. By opening each advising session with an allowance for story sharing, the advisor created opportunity for collaborative problem solving, in which "the student more actively participates in the process" (Pizzolato & Ozaki, 2007, p. 204). Such student participation in the problem-solving process encourages self-definition, and can enhance first-year students' success "by being intentional about understanding students' strategy patterns and helping them to devise effective strategies" (Clark, 2005, p. 310). Listening to and allowing for students to take the lead in problem solving are powerful tools for student affairs professionals to utilize in supporting self-definition.

A third suggestion for student affairs professionals is to simply be more available to first-year students. When work feels all-consuming, time spent directly with students can be one of the easiest things to delegate elsewhere, cut back on, or possibly even cancel altogether. However, "maintaining ongoing contact with students during the entire first year could allow [higher education professionals] to be more effective in helping students recognize challenges" (Clark, 2005, p. 311), and ultimately assist student movement into The Crossroads. Student affairs professionals must do their best to make time to have conversations with students outside of mandatory meetings or trainings associated with their work. Showing first-year students that their stories, concerns, and questions are worthy of our time and focus helps them to realize the importance of their voice, and therefore encourages development. "Influencing and fostering student learning and development can be thought of in terms of intentionally creating an environment to draw out students' inner sense of self and talents and providing opportunities for students to explore, develop, and change" (Braskamp, 2008, p. 51), and that environment must (at times) be intentionally created—even at the cost of temporarily postponing a project or email.

### **A Final Word**

These suggested practices are just that—suggestions. There is more work to be done in terms of understanding both the precise nature of how first year students enter The Crossroads, as well as the exact role played by student affairs

professionals in facilitating student self-definition. More research must be done to consider how to best support students of differing identities; it cannot be assumed that what works for one student will work for all. So far, students have identified out-of-class experiences, service learning, and informal contact with professionals as moments of potential intrapersonal tension, when they realize that they may no longer need or want to rely solely on authority figures to make decisions and meaning. Student affairs professionals are encouraged to avoid providing students with formulas during times of tension, to genuinely listen to students, and to make themselves more available for informal time with students. Such practices encourage students to take the reins on their own problem solving and to work through a time of intrapersonal tension, through *The Crossroads*, and onto self-definition.



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