

Take a Step Forward

Madison Delks

Indiana University

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### Introduction

Everyone's educational experiences are unique. All students reflect upon their college years differently, they may deem them challenging, discouraging, empowering, confusing, gratifying, etc. Positive student development is what every student affairs professional should desire for their students and learning how to identify what is developmental is the first step in promoting that kind of development.

As put very simply by Patton, Renn, Guido, and Quaye (2016), development is the process of becoming increasingly complex (p. 5). I am also quickly learning that *learning* about student development is *also* increasingly complex! Student development is a process, one that does not happen overnight, but over the course of time. According to Banta (2002), this change can include:

- (a) Complex cognitive skills such as reflection and critical thinking, (b) an ability to apply knowledge to practical problems encountered in one's vocation, family, or other areas of life, (c) an understanding and appreciation of human differences, (d) practical competencies such as decision making, conflict resolution, and team work, and (e) a coherent integrated sense of identity, self-esteem, confidence, integrity, aesthetic sensibilities, spirituality, and civic responsibility. (p 101)

As seen above, there are *endless* areas students develop in, using theories can help us make sense of the ways students develop and make sense of students' lives and experiences (Patton, 2016, p. 52). Using theories correctly can help us clearly examine, process, and sometimes predict a student's development. Categorizing theories has helped me more clearly understand student development and theory. According to Patton "Student development includes theories of

social identities, psychosocial identity development, cognitive/epistemological development, moral development, and holistic authorship (Patton, 2016, p. 17).” Applying the specific theories just mentioned and Banta’s list of how students develop to the review of Parker Mantell’s speech, helped me clearly analyze his development.

After watching Parker Mantell’s commencement speech, it is obvious he attributes his development as a student and human being to his college years at Indiana University. I will be using my knowledge of what student development is and the theories associated with student development as the foundation for the rest of my paper. In the following paragraphs, I will be reviewing Parker Mantell’s speech by identifying his areas of development, his changes to his own understanding, and why those areas/experiences are considered developmental.

### **Areas of Development: Changes of Understanding and Why They are Considered Developmental**

#### **Social Identity**

The first area of development I would like to review is Parker Mantell’s social identity development. Shortly after Parker Mantell begins his speech, we hear him publicly proclaim that there is a problem with society and their assumptions about those with disabilities. We hear him reject society’s assumptions about those with disabilities and hear him continue to encourage the audience to achieve and step forward. According to Torres (2011), “Identity formation is defined at various stages of life as a balance between self and other people, societal norms, and/or cultural expectations (p. 433).” We know Parker’s social identity changed over the course of his four years at IU because we can hear how he carefully rejected societal/cultural expectations about those with disabilities and how he aligned himself with rightful thinking about his identity

and those around him. Parker tells students to “take a step forward not despite your disability, but *because of your disability.*” That statement helps us see that Parker exhibits an understanding and appreciation of human differences, which is an area of development included in Banta’s list above. Acquiring solid beliefs about one’s identity is an enormous step for all college students, especially for those who are in a minority.

For those who are in a minority (like those with disabilities) identity development is an even more complex developmental task (Torres, 2011, p. 435). Though we cannot know for sure how Parker’s strong identity developed, we know that IU was a rich environment for building confidence and assuredness in his identity. Maybe Parker had encouraging professors, challenging internships, growth filled classes, empowering friends, or parents that instilled confidence in his abilities. Parker clearly exhibits positive development. Looking at Banta’s (2002) student development changes, we see that Parker obtained complex cognitive skills like reflection and critical thinking, and a sense of self-esteem, confidence, and civic responsibility during his collegiate career (p.101). Those types of development changes are critical in developing a strong social identity and Parker Mantell reached those developmental peaks in his college years.

### **Psychosocial Identity**

The second area of development I am going to review is Parker Mantell’s psychosocial identity development. We see from the introduction of Parker Mantell and from his own speech that he is heavily involved in student development activities such as: being involved in a fraternity, being a campus leader, and applying and obtaining several internships. We hear the pride in Parker’s voice as he talks about his accomplishments in those activities and can see that his confidence in himself and his abilities grew with his involvement. According to Patton

(2016), students who have high campus involvement and are involved in extracurricular activities enjoy higher levels of confidence, purpose, interpersonal relationships and intimacy (p. 307). In Parker's speech, we hear him talk more in-depth about his internships and how he did everything from answering phones, conducting tours, doing outreach calls, and participating in campaigns for different government officials. With Parker being involved in all of those activities, we can conclude that those activities and his experiences at IU contributed to his development and his collegiate ways of thinking. Environment had a lot to do with his growth.

Parker thrived in his years at IU. We know that the development of students' psychosocial identities thrive in certain educational environments. Chickering lays out seven key factors of a thriving college environment and we can see (and guess) a few of those factors in IU's environment that directly influenced Parker Mantell. The factors we see in IU are: student-faculty relationships, friendships and student communities, and student development programs and services (Patton, 2016, p. 301-302). We can deduce that Parker connected with his professors, faculty, staff, and students during his time as a campus leader. He was also involved in student community groups and development services throughout his collegiate career which helped his development.

According to Torres (2011), having high interaction with faculty and peers and getting valuable feedback on performances in their campus involvement encourages students to try new ways of thinking (p.444). We see this "new way of thinking" in Parker's speech when he talks about confidence. Parker has a whole new outlook on life at the end of his four years at IU and we hear him give credit to IU for his growth in confidence. Parker talks about how doubt kills dreams, but *confidence* kills doubt. We see Parker exuding confidence in his speech, but we know developing that kind of confidence did not happen overnight. Being involved helped

Parker develop psychosocial skills that Banta (2002) writes about: decision making, conflict resolution, teamwork, and ultimately confidence (p.101). All of Parker's campus and extracurricular experiences at IU helped mold, sharpen, and refine him.

### **Conclusion**

We can conclude that Parker Mantell had an incredibly empowering and rewarding experience as a student at Indiana University. From his speech we can see the areas he developed as a student and what factors influenced that development. Areas of development include social and psychosocial identity development, with Parker specifically growing in some of Banta's development list: critical thinking, understanding and appreciation of human differences, decision making, team work, integrated sense of identity, self-esteem, confidence, integrity, aesthetic sensibilities and civic responsibility. That growth can be attributed to factors like: his involvement on and off IU's campus (campus leader, fraternity brother, and intern); finding balance between himself, other people, societal norms, and cultural expectations for those with disabilities, and being a part of a campus that promotes confidence. As student affairs professionals, it is important for us to be able to identify positive development in stories like Parker Mantell's so we can help promote that kind of student development in our own students.

## References

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