Reconceptualizing the Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity: The Role of Meaning-Making Capacity in the Construction of Multiple Identities

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We reconceptualize Jones and McEwen’s (2000) model of multiple dimensions of identity by incorporating meaning making, based on the results of Abes and Jones’s (2004) study of lesbian college students. Narratives of three students who utilize different orders of Kegan’s (1994) meaning making (formulaic, transitional, and foundational, as described by Baxter Magolda, 2001) illustrate how meaning-making capacity interacts with the influences of context on the perceptions and salience of students’ multiple social identities. Implications for theory, research, and professional practice are discussed.

Recent scholarship in the area of college student identity development has begun to address the complexities of the relationships among three primary domains of development: interpersonal, intrapersonal, and cognitive (e.g., Baxter Magolda, 2001; King & Baxter Magolda, 2005; Torres & Baxter Magolda, 2004). Within the intrapersonal domain, the model of multiple dimensions of identity (Jones & McEwen, 2000) provided one of the first conceptualizations of relationships among social identities (e.g., race, gender, social class, sexual orientation), as well as between personal identity and social identities. Although acknowledged as a contribution to a more complex understanding of identity (e.g., Chavez, Guido-DiBrito, & Mallory, 2003; Davis, 2002; Stevens, 2004), the model does not incorporate other domains such as cognitive development. Abes and Jones (2004), however, in a study of lesbian identity development and meaning making, applied the model of multiple dimensions of identity in conjunction with constructivist–developmental theory. The purpose of this article is to propose, based on Abes and Jones’s study, a more complex conceptualization of the model of multiple dimensions of identity that integrates intersecting domains of development.

Because the focus of our work is on developing a more complex conceptualization of the multiple identities model, we position this study within contemporary theorizations of multiple and intersecting identities. To do so, we provide an overview of identity as social construction, feminist and postmodern conceptualizations of intersectionality, and the model of multiple dimensions of identity. We then explore Kegan’s (1994) theory of lifespan development and Baxter Magolda’s (2001) research on young adult development toward self-authorship, which is incorporated into our reconceptualization of the multiple identities model.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY

Weber (1998) identified social constructionism as a common theme within scholarship exploring relationships among race, class, gender, and sexuality. A social constructionist
perspective on identity challenges the essentialist position that reifies dominant–subordinate binaries presumed to be grounded in biology (e.g., White–non-White, men–women, heterosexual—homosexual; Weber). Instead, social constructionism considers identity to be socially, historically, politically, and culturally constructed at both the institutional and individual levels (Omi & Winant, 1994; Weber). The meaning of social identities cannot be fully captured as they change with evolving contexts and relationships (Omi & Winant). Although essentialism provided the basis for much of the earlier research and resulting theoretical perspectives on student development, contemporary student affairs researchers are increasingly relying on social constructionism as they explore the meanings of identity (McEwen, 2003).

CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF INTERSECTIONALITY

Feminist Conceptualizations

Much of the theorizing on multiple identities developed in women’s studies literature, often through personal narratives (Weber, 1998). A significant body of this literature grew out of Black feminist scholarship that challenged feminism’s Eurocentric assumptions (e.g., hooks, 1984; Smith, 1982). This feminist literature introduced a “framework of intersectionality” that recognized how socially constructed identities are experienced simultaneously, not hierarchically (McCann & Kim, 2002, p. 150). Collins (1990) termed this framework a “matrix of domination” and explained that viewing relationships from an intersecting perspective “expands the focus of analysis from merely describing the similarities and differences distinguishing these systems of oppression and focuses greater attention on how they interconnect” (p. 222).

Autobiographical narratives from two feminist scholars, Lorde (1984) and Anzaldua (1999), illustrated a wholeness associated with integrating multiple identity dimensions within a matrix of domination. Lorde, a “Black lesbian feminist socialist mother of two . . . and a member of an interracial couple” (p. 114), explained that her “fullest concentration of energy is available . . . only when I integrate all the parts of who I am . . . without the restrictions of externally imposed definition” (pp. 120-121). Discussing her experiences as a Mexican American lesbian, a mestiza, Anzaldua offered her theory of mestiza consciousness, or her ability to bring together multiple identities into a new, integrated identity where “the self has added a third element which is greater than the sum of its severed parts. That element is a new consciousness” (pp. 101-102).

Despite its complex explorations of boundary-crossing identities, a conundrum exists within this feminist literature. By studying how aspects of identity, such as race and social class, create differences within women’s experiences, an unintended presumption of unity arises within the categories introduced to demonstrate differences (McCann & Kim, 2002). Just as feminists have urged that there is not a singular meaning associated with the experiences of women, so too there is not a singular meaning associated with the experiences of women by nature of the socially constructed categories of race, social class, or sexual orientation. To fully embrace individual experiences, it is necessary to explore differences within each aspect of identity as each is influenced by the simultaneous experience of the other dimensions (McCann & Kim).

Postmodern Conceptualizations

The impossibility, due to difference, of capturing all experiences associated with identity categories is at the heart of a post-
modern theorization of multiple identities. Postmodernism abandons “grand narratives” because they ignore the influence of social, political, and cultural power in people’s lives (Tierney & Rhoads, 1993, p. 315). In their place, postmodernists stress “differences between and within groups—race, class, gender, and sexual orientation, for example” (Tierney & Rhoads, p. 315). Informed by the writing of French philosopher Jacques Derrida, a postmodern conceptualization of difference suggests that this construct cannot be easily “dismantled” into “oppositional predicates” and is “neither this nor that; but rather this and that” (Kearney, 1984, p. 110). Grounded in these principles, a postmodern critique of identity challenges the stability of identity categories.

Of particular relevance to our reconceptualization of the model of multiple identities is the postmodern perspective of queer theory, which suspends the classifications of lesbian, gay, bisexual, masculine, and feminine (Tierney & Dilley, 1998). Principles of queer theory disrupt traditional identity categories based on the suppositions that identity is performed and therefore unstable (Butler, 1991) and comprised of fluid differences rather than a unified essence (Fuss, 1989). Fuss explained that the failure to study identity as difference implies a unity in identity that overlooks variations within identity, such as race and class. Categories are insufficient because differences within those categories cause them to have “multiple and contradictory meanings” (Fuss, p. 98).

MODEL OF MULTIPLE DIMENSIONS OF IDENTITY

Much of the recent literature on multiple identities in student affairs scholarship references Jones and McEwen’s (2000) model of multiple dimensions of identity (e.g., Chavez et al., 2003; Davis, 2002; Love, Bock, Jannarone, & Richardson 2005; Miville, Darlington, Whitlock, & Mulligan, 2005). The model (Figure 1) offers a conceptual depiction of relationships among college students’ socially constructed identity dimensions, recognizing that each dimension cannot be fully understood in isolation. Building on the work of Reynolds and Pope (1991) and Deaux (1993) and based on the results of grounded theory research with women college students (Jones, 1997), the model of multiple dimensions of identity describes the dynamic construction of identity and the influence of changing contexts on the relative salience of multiple identity dimensions, such as race, sexual orientation, culture, and social class. The model portrays identity dimensions as intersecting rings around a core, signifying how “no one dimension may be understood singularly; it can be understood only in relation to other dimensions” (Jones & McEwen, p. 410). At the center of the model is a core sense of self, comprising “valued personal attributes and characteristics” (Jones, p. 383). Surrounding the core and identity dimensions is the context in which a person experiences her life, such as family, sociocultural conditions, and current experiences. The salience of each identity dimension to the core is fluid and depends on contextual influences (Jones & McEwen).

CONSTRUCTIVIST–DEVELOPMENTAL THEORY AND MULTIPLE IDENTITIES

Constructivist–developmental theory considers intrapersonal, cognitive, and interpersonal domains of development as part of a single, integrated mental activity and describes the interrelated development of each domain from simple to complex (Kegan, 1994). Kegan’s integrated theory consists of five “orders of
consciousness,” representing increasingly complex “meaning-making structures,” which are sets of assumptions that determine how an individual perceives and organizes one’s life experiences (Kegan).

In her extensive longitudinal research, Baxter Magolda (2001) explored Kegan’s (1994) work in the context of college students and young adults. Baxter Magolda (2001) suggested that Kegan’s third order of consciousness is the most prevalent meaning-making structure among traditional-aged college students. The third order is characterized by making meaning through concrete relationships to which one’s own interests are subordinated (Kegan). Relationships define identity, and no process exists for negotiating conflicting relationships. Baxter Magolda (1999a) described this as “formulaic” meaning making. Fewer college students make meaning at the fourth order, or “foundational” meaning making (Baxter Magolda, 1999a), which is characterized by self-authorship. Requiring complexity in all three domains (interpersonal,
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intrapersonal, and cognitive), self-authorship occurs through “an ability to construct knowledge in a contextual world, an ability to construct an internal identity separate from external influences, and an ability to engage in relationships without losing one’s internal identity” (Baxter Magolda, 1999b, p. 12). Students making a transition between formulaic and foundational meaning making are at a “crossroads” (Baxter Magolda, 1999b, p. 38). During this transitional period dominated by tensions and unresolved conflicts between their developing internal voices and external influences, students gradually question formulas increasingly incongruent with developing internal values.

Little research has been conducted exploring self-authorship in the context of how students make meaning of their socially constructed identities, such as race and sexuality. No published research has explored a relationship between self-authorship and intersectionality of social identities. Torres and Baxter Magolda (2004) offered evidence of the role of cognitive complexity in the development of ethnic identity among Latino/a students. Results of their longitudinal study indicated that increased cognitive complexity related to less reliance on stereotypes, authorities, and the approval of others to shape their ethnic identity. King and Baxter Magolda (2005) developed a conceptual framework for intercultural maturity grounded in the integration of cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal development. The intrapersonal dimension of their framework presents a relationship between Kegan’s (1994) orders of consciousness and theories of social identity development. In the only study to consider the relationship between college students’ meaning-making capacity and perceptions of relationships among their multiple social identity dimensions, Abes and Jones (2004) simultaneously considered Kegan’s constructivist-developmental theory and the model of multiple dimensions of identity (Jones & McEwen, 2000). The purpose of this article is to analyze the results of Abes and Jones’s study in the context of the model of multiple dimensions of identity and offer, based on this analysis, a reconceptualized model that more aptly captures the complexity of intersecting domains of development.

OVERVIEW OF ABES AND JONES’S (2004) STUDY

The purpose of Abes and Jones’s (2004) study was to explore how lesbian college students perceived their sexual orientation identity and its interaction with other dimensions of identity, such as race, religion, social class, and gender. The design and rationale of the study are detailed in Abes and Jones; we provide an overview here.

Abes and Jones’s (2004) study was grounded in a constructivist theoretical framework, which assumes that knowledge is mutually constructed between the researchers and participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). To understand how the participants made meaning of their identities, this study utilized narrative inquiry methodology. The purpose of narrative inquiry is to understand the wholeness of human experience through data collected in the form of stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). This methodological approach is well suited to identity studies because stories offer revealing glimpses into inner selves (Lieblich et al.; Riessman, 2002). Stories not only reveal, but also shape identity because identity stories are “told, revised, and retold throughout life. We know or discover ourselves, and reveal ourselves to others, by the stories we tell” (Lieblich et al., p. 7).

Purposeful sampling was used to obtain information-rich cases (Patton, 1990). All 10
participants, ages 18–23, attended a large, public research university in the Midwest. Five were students of color (one Black, one Latina, one Puerto Rican-Caucasian, one Trinidadian-Caucasian, and one African American-Caucasian); five were Caucasian. There were two Jewish women, one Agnostic, one Pagan, one Agnostic Pagan, one Christian, one Catholic, and three who did not identify with a religion. Eight identified as female, two as androgynous. Six women identified as middle class, one temporarily poor, one working class, and two upper-middle class.

Data were collected through three open-ended interviews with each participant. During the latter part of the second interview, each participant was asked to map her identity onto the model of multiple dimensions of identity (Jones & McEwen, 2000). For data analysis, Abes and Jones (2004) used primarily a categorical content approach, which utilizes constant comparative analysis (Lieblich et al., 1998). Results of the analysis were used to construct much of the participants’ narratives. Abes and Jones also considered the structure of the participants’ stories, including “the gaps, the silences, the tensions” (Ritchie & Wilson, 2000, p. 21).

Results of Abes and Jones’s (2004) study suggested that meaning-making capacity served as a filter through which contextual factors are interpreted prior to influencing self-perceptions of sexual orientation identity and its relationship with other identity dimensions. How context influenced these perceptions depended on the complexity of the meaning-making filter. Participants with complex meaning-making capacity were able, more so than those with less developed capacity, to filter contextual influences, such as family background, peer culture, social norms, and stereotypes, and determine how context influenced their identity. Complex meaning making also facilitated the ease with which sexual orientation was integrated or peacefully co-existed with other dimensions and the extent to which participants’ perceptions of their identity dimensions were consistent with the sense of self they hoped to achieve.

**INCORPORATING MEANING-MAKING CAPACITY INTO THE MODEL OF MULTIPLE DIMENSIONS OF IDENTITY**

Revisiting the model of multiple dimensions of identity through the results of Abes and Jones’s (2004) study suggests that incorporating meaning-making capacity into the model would more thoroughly depict the relationship between context and salience (and self perceptions) of identity dimensions, as well as the relationship between social identities and the core of identity. The reconceptualized model (Figure 2), unlike the original model, portrays in two dimensions the interactive nature of the relationships among components of the identity construction process: context, meaning making, and identity perceptions. Contextual influences are drawn in Figure 2 as arrows external to identity. The social identity dimensions are represented similarly to the Jones and McEwen (2000) model. Meaning-making capacity is drawn as a filter. How contextual influences move through the filter depends on the depth and permeability of the filter. The depth (thickness) and permeability (size of openings) of the filter are drawn based on the complexity of the person’s meaning-making capacity. To illustrate complex meaning making, the filter would be drawn with increased depth and smaller grid openings; less complex meaning-making capacity would be illustrated through a narrower filter with wider grid openings. Regardless of differences in meaning making, context influences identity perceptions; differences in the depth of the
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Filter and size of the grid openings incorporate contextual influences in qualitatively different ways.

Through narratives of three research participants, we offer possibilities of how their identity perceptions might be illustrated through the model with meaning-making capacity integrated into it. The three participants, Amy, Carmen, and Jacky, provide examples of formulaic, transitional, and foundational meaning making. The selections from the narratives describe these participants’ perceptions of relationships among their multiple identity dimensions. These selections represent only small parts of a much more in-depth analysis of these three women’s detailed narratives, which allowed us to assess meaning-making capacity (Abes, 2003).

Formulaic Meaning Making and Multiple Dimensions of Identity

Because minimal filtering occurs in formulaic meaning making, contextual influences and perceptions of identity are closely connected. Participants infrequently saw relationships between or among their multiple identities. For instance, they perceived their sexual orientation as separate from their ethnicity if that was what they learned from their family; they perceived their sexual orientation as incompatible with their religion if this is how religious leaders taught them to interpret the major teachings of their religion; and they perceived their gender as either too masculine
or too feminine if that is what friends and stereotypes told them.

Amy’s Story. Amy, a 23-year-old senior, who prides herself on her unwavering opinions and “flaunts her individuality,” exemplifies formulaic meaning-making capacity. Amy, who explained that there are two types of lesbians, “coffee shop lesbians and bar lesbians,” and never the two shall mix, appeared to unknowingly define her identity in direct opposition to stereotypes, which laced her stories. A self-described bar lesbian, Amy refused to be like the people who attend gay and lesbian student organizations, whom she described as “the same kind of people that are like save the world. . . I refuse to be anywhere near that.” Amy’s story demonstrates that formulaic meaning making might result in an identity that is constructed in direct and seemingly unanalyzed opposition to stereotypes. Even though Amy did not construct her identity in a manner consistent with stereotypes, stereotypes still dictated how she perceived her identity. Amy defined herself through who she is not, rather than through who she is.

Believing she was rejecting stereotypes, Amy announced she “flaunted her originality,” which meant rejecting most environmental influences. She explained:

I don’t put myself into one group of people. I consider myself one of a kind and that’s it. I’m me. I’m my own class, group, genre, everything, like that’s how I look at things. . . . I don’t seek to relate to other people. I don’t because I’m me, I’m myself.

One implication of her desire to be unique was that she denied the possibility that aspects of her identity, such as sexual orientation, race, and social class, affected who she was as a person. As a result, she saw few relationships among her identity dimensions. Because connections with other people were not a primary concern, Amy did not allow her family’s expectations to influence how she thought about being gay. For instance, Amy, who was Trinidadian-Caucasian, felt that some of her Trinidadian family members disapproved of her sexual orientation because it did not meet their cultural expectations. She rejected their opinions, not because of internal meaning making, but because she rejected other people’s opinions in general, explaining, “I’m not that close to other people . . . and I don’t really care. I was like, whatever, it’s who I am.”

However, not seeming to realize the influence of stereotypes on her thinking, Amy described a relationship between her social class and sexual orientation. Explaining her generally unwavering opinion about the social class of lesbians, she observed:

I think lesbians are poor in general. . . . The ones that are wealthy, they’re few and far between. You usually see lesbians who are bar flies, UPS delivery workers, or the lesbian that’s the construction worker. You see the lumberjack. You never see the lawyer or the doctor in these bars. You never see the professional lesbian. . . . I think it’s because the lesbians I’m in contact with are young. They’re all just out of college or in college. And then the other ones you see at the bars are the old tired lesbians that are really gross and old in their 40s and 50s and sipping on their whiskey.

Although Amy wanted to achieve a higher social class than the women she saw in the bars, these stereotypes had a relatively unfiltered influence on how she understood the relationship between sexual orientation and social class.

Amy’s Model. When Amy depicted her identity in relationship to the model, she placed most of the dimensions, including
cultural, race, sexual orientation, and gender, approximately the same distance from her core. Social class was further from her core. Religion, which she described as “hooey,” was not relevant to her identity perceptions. Always defining her identity in opposition to stereotypes, she was adamant that none of these social identities influenced who she was as a person. Depicted on the reconceptualized model, Amy’s meaning-making filter would be relatively simple. Contextual influences would pass through the filter without Amy making her own meaning of them.

Transitional Meaning Making and Multiple Dimensions of Identity

Several of the participants were making a transition or on the brink of a transition between formulaic and foundational meaning making. Their stories reflected tensions and conflicts within their identity. As their meaning making grew more complex, these participants were starting to realize the limitations of stereotypes, feel frustrated by identity labels insufficient to describe how they made sense of whom they were, and challenge other people’s expectations that caused difficulties integrating multiple identity dimensions. Still, they relied on comfortable formulaic ways of knowing at the same time that they started to see some of the shortcomings of doing so. For instance, they simultaneously believed that it was acceptable to pass as straight when their sexual orientation clashed with their ethnicity and that there was no reason why their ethnicity and sexual orientation needed to be separate; and they believed, but with lingering doubts as a result of stereotypes, that lesbians could achieve upper-class economic status.

Carmen’s Story. Carmen, a 19-year-old Puerto Rican-Caucasian sophomore, whose meaning making appeared to be at the crossroads between formulaic and foundational, defined her identity though external influences at the same time that she started to realize the limitations of doing so. Although increasingly frustrating to her, she still allowed relatively unfiltered influences from her family, stereotypes, and social norms to determine relationships among her sexual orientation, gender, religion, and culture.

Carmen, for whom identifying with Christianity was important, explained that she did not allow her family’s insistence that she would go to hell for being gay influence her attitude about her sexual orientation. She thought it hypocritical to use religion, which teaches the importance of loving everybody, as a basis for disapproving of gay people and explained:

God made me this way... even if it is a flaw... it’s a flaw that He’s created. ...I just don’t think that because I love differently He doesn’t want me to follow his religion or anything like that. ... The only person that should be concerned with that is me and God. Our relationship is whatever I want it to be.

At the same time, Carmen was uncertain she would ever practice her religion because of the opinions of other people. She explained:

I think it’s difficult just because some religions aren’t accepting of my lifestyle and stuff like that. ... Christianity, they don’t accept it, it’s not viewed as normal. It makes it harder for me to relate to religion, equate religion in my life.

However, dating a woman would not necessarily exclude being religious. She explained that this would also depend on whether the woman portrayed her gender as “butch or femme,” terms she defined through stereotypes:

If I ended up with a femme girl, and she was Christian, I’d guess we would go to church and we’d try to lead like decent lives... according to the Bible. If I settle down with a butch girl, chances are she’s
not going to feel comfortable, or the Church isn’t going to feel comfortable. Finding the right fit is going to be harder in my life I guess.

Carmen expressed frustration with these expectations that did not coincide with her evolving internal beliefs. Still, she relied on external influences, allowing them to strongly influence her perceptions of the relationship among her gender, sexual orientation, and religious identities.

Similarly, Carmen’s perceptions of the relationship between her ethnicity and sexual orientation wavered, revealing inner conflict between wanting to be her own person and resigning herself to the expectations of others. Some of Carmen’s closest relatives disapproved of her sexual orientation, based in part, she believed, on traditional Puerto Rican values. Carmen’s father questioned why she would want to be gay when it added to the “strikes” she already had against her as a Puerto Rican woman. Based on their opinions, Carmen resigned herself to believing that her sexual orientation and culture will unlikely be integrated and attempted to convince herself she was satisfied with that relationship. She explained:

When I’m around a bunch of Puerto Ricans, I’m not going to be like, yeah I’m gay. . . . If we’re getting together, if the focus is more towards my culture or doing something with that aspect of my life . . . then I guess the two are separate there. . . . Eventually I hope when my kids’ kids are alive it’s not such a big issue. And I don’t see it happening. . . . Not that I don’t think I can make a difference with a few of my relatives’ opinions or anything but . . . I don’t see why the two really need to come together.

At the same time that she stated these two dimensions of her identity don’t have to come together, it was hard for her to understand why they cannot.

Carmen’s Model. When Carmen depicted her identity onto the model, she explained that sexual orientation touches her core sense of self as it was the aspect of her identity to which she gave the most thought and that influenced her behavior. She explained this was because she was “abnormal” in society’s eyes. Similarly, Carmen explained that her gender was close to her core, but only because of social norms with which she didn’t agree but from which she did not believe she could escape. This perceived bind was a result of transitional meaning making. At the same time that she “just wants to be myself and it shouldn’t matter,” typically wearing men’s clothes and exhibiting masculine mannerisms, she also acknowledged that she worried about what other people thought about her gender expression. If it were up to Carmen, who stated: “I don’t think about my gender without taking into account social norms,” her gender would have been the least important aspect of her identity. She was not sure, though, this was possible.

Also a result of transitional meaning making, she depicted religion in two different ways. She drew religion as a separate identity ring apart from the others, given the complications involved in understanding how religion fits into her life. On the same model, she also drew religion in her core sense of self because she believed that once she has religion in her life, it would be central to her identity. She believed religion would change in salience more than any other aspect of her identity. This dual role of religion, caused by her new and tentative questioning of external influences, is shown in her active questioning of and disagreement with her family’s reaction that she would go to hell for being gay. Also illustrative of the transition in meaning-making capacity is her growing internal belief that she could define her own relationship with
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God despite her family’s opinion.

Depicted on the reconceptualized model, Carmen’s meaning-making filter would be more complex than Amy’s. The filter would have varying depths, allowing some contextual influences to pass through reinterpreted and reshaped by Carmen, and others defined externally and relatively unchanged.

Foundational Meaning Making and Multiple Dimensions of Identity

With a complex meaning-making filter, participants with foundational meaning-making capacity, or approaching such capacity, had greater ability to determine the relationship between context and perceptions of identity. These women were adept at resisting stereotypes and typically presented their identity in a consistent manner regardless of the environment. Movement toward an internally generated identity allowed some participants to define for themselves relationships among multiple identity dimensions such that they peacefully co-existed. For instance, they understood their sexual orientation to be consistent with their religious beliefs, regardless of how others defined their religion; and they understood their sexual orientation and gender expression as consistent, even when their peers told them otherwise.

Jacky’s Story. Jacky’s story illustrates foundational meaning making. A self-described “temporarily poor, Black, gay, female, Agnostic Pagan, liberal, communist, socialist,” Jacky was an academically and politically inquisitive 21-year-old junior. She was keenly aware of her lack of multiple privileges, as well as the privileges she did have, and the numerous reasons for people to discriminate against her. She spent much time researching various political and identity-based issues, reading in-depth about all sides of an issue and then reaching her own conclusions after a logical analysis of multiple perspectives.

Personal and societal discrimination influenced Jacky’s thinking about the multiple dimensions of her identity. These contextual factors, however, influenced her identity perceptions in a qualitatively different manner from the ways in which context influenced Amy’s and Carmen’s self-perceptions. Jacky did not perceive discrimination as determining the meaning she made of each dimension, but rather, discrimination fueled her political fire. To understand how we interpret Jacky’s meaning-making capacity, it is important to realize the depth of her political commitment. Jacky, for whom personal is political, considered politics as central to her identity, typically more salient than socially constructed identities, such as race and gender. She explained: “[Social identities] influence my political leanings, and my political leanings influence [social identities], it goes both ways. [Politics] informs a lot of my beliefs, just, I’m a political science major, so I study current topics, or current events.” It was the centrality of her political commitments that drove her politically charged and personally meaningful response to personal and societal discrimination relevant to her socially constructed identities. Her response to discrimination grew out of her political beliefs, but did not determine self-perceptions of her socially constructed identities.

For instance, a lack of domestic partnership benefits caused her to be “temporarily poor,” serving as a catalyst for her to focus on the relationship between her sexual orientation and social class. Jacky’s anger regarding the lack of benefits provoked her to take actions to fight this inequality but did not necessarily influence the way in which she understood her sexual orientation and social class identities. She explained:

It doesn’t make me feel sorry that I’m gay or anything like that, but it makes me wish I could be more able to change the
system. . . . I’m Black, gay, and female, and leftist . . . and I’m not a Christian. . . . It makes me follow politics that much more. . . . It helped me shape my opinions and my politics and my point of view.

Likewise, Jacky was aware of discrimination based on her gender. She attributed this to her professional interests in computers, a male-dominated field. Although it was not a pressing matter to her, Jacky explained that her gender does not “fit into the boxes very well. . . . gender is performance. . . . and I’ve never really picked up on social norms. . . . I’m just a chick who likes drums and computers.” Rather than discrimination altering how she perceived her identity, she became more intrigued by the politics of gender.

Raised in a Catholic household, Jacky used her complex thinking to research and critically analyze numerous religions before identifying a practice she felt fit her best. Even as a young child, before considering her sexual orientation, she never connected with Catholicism yet was intrigued by religion. After she conducted extensive research and tried on various religious practices, she eventually identified as an Agnostic Pagan “who’s an atheist when in a bad mood,” because she felt it was an expression of herself despite expectations from others for a more traditional religious identity. Although Jacky gave much thought to both her sexual orientation and religion, she rarely thought of the two together. With the capacity to filter out other people’s negative perceptions of her identity as a Pagan gay woman, she made her own meaning of this identity. Jacky explained:

I’m gay, and I’m a Pagan. I’m not necessarily a gay Pagan or a Pagan gay person. They’re not against each other . . . but they’re two different parts of my identity. Usually if I’m thinking about one, I’m not thinking about the other.

In fact, Jacky typically thought of her multiple identities as parallel rather than intersecting. The few times she considered them to intersect were when she was discriminated against and could not determine which aspect of her identity triggered the behavior. She explained:

I guess [dimensions of my identity] are not completely parallel, some of them do cross or confound, but I think of them more as I’m a lesbian, I’m Black, I’m a Pagan, atheist, whatever. But then sometimes it will be like I’m a Black lesbian . . . or I’m a Pagan lesbian . . . I think it’s situation related. . . . I think about it more as these are parts of me, and it just happens to be that they’re all like not the norm. . . . Most of the time if I’m discriminated against, I can tell if it’s for a certain reason, like this person doesn’t like me because I’m gay, this person doesn’t like me because I’m Black . . . and then there’s the times when I’m not quite sure why the person doesn’t like me, or why I’m getting treated in such a way. And I think that’s when it becomes intermingled.

When intermingled, discrimination still influenced her politics more so than identity perceptions. Jacky’s capacity to richly analyze the relationship between discrimination and her identity perceptions and maintain some ownership over the dynamic saliency of these dimensions illustrates the complexity of her meaning-making capacity.

**Jacky’s Model.** Jacky depicted her identity through the model with sexual orientation and gender closest to her core; race, religion, social class, and disability (she lived with attention deficit disorder) were further away. Sharply aware of discrimination as a contextual influence, Jacky explained that the salience of her identity dimensions is quite fluid. This fluidity did not change how she understood her identity, but rather, where she would devote her political energy. Jacky explained that that there was a “range of saliency” along
which each dimension of her identity moved closer or further away from her inner sense of self, depending on the nature of the discrimination she was experiencing.

Always cognizant of constant discrimination based on her sexual orientation, she stated: “Sexuality is the biggest part of my identity that affects me as far as discrimination. . . . I feel that constantly every single day, day in and day out.” Consistently close to the core, sexual orientation’s range of saliency was narrow. She explained that her religion probably had the greatest range along which it moves. Jacky, who was “not raised in Black culture,” explained that race typically was not an aspect of her identity to which she gave much thought. But her race traveled along its saliency range over the course of the study, at one point coming in as close to her inner sense of self as she believed it ever would. The movement was precipitated by how infuriated she was about current arguments against race-sensitive affirmative action.

The meaning-making filter in Jacky’s model is more complex than in Amy’s or Carmen’s models. The filter has more depth, and the grid openings are smaller and less porous. Jacky reinterprets the contextual influences as they pass through the filter, ascribing her own internal meaning onto the context. For instance, as contextual influences, which Jacky described as discrimination and her political upbringing, pass through the filter, she makes meaning of them by determining how to translate them into political thought or action.

DISCUSSION
A Reconceptualized, Integrated Model

As illustrated through the narratives of Amy, Carmen, and Jacky, relationships among socially constructed identities represent a complex interaction among multiple domains of development. Although the model of multiple dimensions of identity (Jones & McEwen, 2000) offered for the first time in the literature on student development theory a conceptual framework for understanding relationships among students’ personal and socially constructed identities, we are reconceptualizing the model to incorporate meaning-making capacity. This reconceptualization adds to contemporary student development literature that integrates students’ intrapersonal, cognitive, and interpersonal domains of development (Abes & Jones, 2004; King & Baxter Magolda, 2005; Torres & Baxter Magolda, 2004). Incorporating meaning-making capacity into the model provides a richer portrayal of not only what relationships students perceive among their personal and social identities, but also how they come to perceive them as they do. By incorporating personal and multiple social identities, Jones and McEwen’s model provides a holistic representation of the intrapersonal domain; with the inclusion of meaning-making capacity, the reconceptualized model provides a holistic representation of the integration of intrapersonal development with the cognitive and interpersonal domains.

Integrating meaning-making capacity into the model of multiple dimensions of identity (Jones & McEwen, 2000) also addresses a question regarding distinctions in the model between the core self (personal identity) and the surrounding social identities, especially social identities typically lacking privilege in dominant–subordinate hierarchies. Although this distinction between social identities and core was apparent in the data from which the original model was conceptualized (Jones, 1997), several of the participants in Abes and Jones’s (2004) study included social identities, most often sexual orientation, as part of their core. Their reasons for doing so differed and
were related in some measure to meaning-making capacity.

Some participants with complex meaning-making capacity considered sexual orientation part of their core because they perceived this dimension as internally defined and fully incorporated into their identity. In contrast, others considered sexual orientation as core because they perceived their core to be influenced by external factors; these participants resisted the notion that core could be wholly defined internally. Utilizing transitional meaning-making capacity, these participants recognized that social norms were catalysts for sexual orientation to be in their core, regardless of whether it was something they wanted to be central to their identity. For example, Carmen reluctantly perceived her sexual orientation and gender as core because she realized that external influences caused these aspects of her identity to be central to whom she was as a person. Reconceptualizing Jones and McEwen’s (2000) model by integrating meaning-making capacity opens up possibilities for understanding not only relationships between context and identity, but also between social identities and the core. Doing so also provides a reminder that high salience of a social identity in relationship to the core does not always imply positive self-perceptions of that identity. An externally defined identity could be salient to one’s sense of self but for negative reasons, such as family or religious disapproval. Thus, incorporating meaning making into the model contributes to a more developmental and dynamic understanding of how persons negotiate complexities of personal and social identities.

**Queer Theory and Multiple Identities**

An inherent irony emerges in the study of multiple dimensions of identity, which is highlighted in our reconceptualized model. Our interest in capturing the complexities of identity development when multiple domains are considered is bolstered by theoretical frameworks such as intersectionality, which includes both feminist conceptualizations and the postmodern perspective of queer theory. However, these theoretical frameworks, especially queer theory, argue against the very notion that identity can be “captured” and that a core identity exists. Britzman (1997) described this tension well:

In terms of educational research, now more often than not, the idea of identity still remains tied to the mistaken view that identities are either given or received and not negotiated socially, politically, and within specific historical conditions. These absences result in the pinning of identity onto a straight continuum. . . . I want to argue for a more complex and historically grounded notion of identity, one interested in identity as fluid, partial, contradictory, nonunitary, and very social matters. (pp. 184-185)

The three narratives of Amy, Carmen, and Jacky illustrate the performative and fluid nature of identity construction. As performative, participants’ actions were not representative of identity; instead, actions created identity (Butler, 1991). Decisions regarding their manner of dress, choice of partners, religious practices, and political involvement became the meaning of their identity dimensions. Participants who utilized more complex meaning making demonstrated an awareness of the performative nature of their identity rather than a reliance on fixed and externally defined meanings. Those utilizing less developed meaning making were not always aware of the performative nature of their identity; still, it was this unacknowledged performativity that lay beneath their attempts to fit into others’ socially constituted expectations and navigate the resulting tensions and ambiguities associated with crossing multiple borders.
In proposing a reconceptualized model, queer theory causes us to revisit the meaning of the core sense of self found in the multiple identities model. Jones (1997) described the core as an inner-defined personal sense of self, incorporating “valued personal attributes and characteristics” (p. 383). It is important at this juncture to clarify that participants in Abes and Jones’s (2004) study described the core and some of their social identities as interacting dynamically. For instance, socially constructed identities might move in and out of the core depending on contextual influences and the changing meaning individuals make of these identities. Although fluid in nature, the core includes personal values and aspects of identity that individuals perceive as central to their sense of self. This conceptualization of the core is consistent with queer theory. Although queer theory suggests that identities are always in a state of movement (e.g., Talburt, 2000), queer theory also suggests that repeating enactments of identity creates one’s identity; this is performativity (Butler, 1991). Although the continuous repetition is a “copy” that never had an “original” (Butler), the repetition creates a sense of self, including a core sense of personal values, however fluid that sense of self might be.

In applying the tenets of queer theory to an illustration of multiple identities, we work to present both the fluid nature of identity and the lived experience of conflict and negotiation as described by the participants. Given the fluid differences within identity (Fuss, 1989), our reconceptualized model is not intended to illustrate a linear, stable, and predictable relationship between meaning-making capacity and the salience and self-perceptions of identity dimensions. We do not believe such an orderly relationship exists. We introduce meaning making into the model as only one key consideration in how students understand their multi-faceted identities. Meaning making neither predicts nor proscribes relative salience or the nature of the relationships among social identities. Meaning making does, however, provide one explanation for how students perceive their identities as they do. With queer principles in mind, the revised model should be interpreted as one possibility for identity construction rather than an orderly, predictable pattern.

Queer theory principles, for example, challenge Jacky’s perceptions of identity dimensions as generally parallel to one another. Fuss (1989) argued that differences should not be seen as space between identities, but instead, space within identities. Here lies one of the tensions of pairing queer theory with college students’ lived experiences interpreted through a constructivist lens. Abes (in press) explored this sometimes contradictory relationship and found that, although queer theory might not always describe college students’ identity perceptions, analyzing relationships among students’ multiple identities through a queer lens revealed how “participants continuously redefined the meaning they made of their identity. They rethought labels they had previously used to describe their identity, considered dimensions of their identity previously taken for granted, and challenged assumptions about what is normal.” With queer principles in mind, the revised model should be interpreted as one possibility for identity construction rather than an orderly, predictable pattern.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY, RESEARCH, AND PRACTICE**

**Theory Development and Interpretation**

Implications for student development theory are suggested by the reconceptualized model, which incorporates meaning making with personal and social identities. Although a wide
array of student development theories is available to student affairs professionals to understand students and guide practice (McEwen, 2003), most theories fall within one of the families of psychosocial, cognitive, and social identity development theories. Few models or theories exist to understand the holistic development of college students. In an early model of maturity in college students (although based on a study only of college men), Heath (1968, 1980) considered development through a matrix of four domains of development (cognitive, self-concept, values, and personal relations) and five sets of developmental tasks. Baxter Magolda (2001), in her longitudinal study of college students into adulthood and their development of self-authorship, and King and Baxter Magolda (2005), in their model of intercultural maturity, provide contemporary perspectives of the intersection of epistemological, intrapersonal, and interpersonal dimensions of development. The reconceptualized model presented here, incorporating meaning making into the model of multiple dimensions of identities (Jones & McEwen, 2000), is placed within the context of few models of holistic development in the student development theory literature. (We note that we are using two sets of words to describe domains of development: psychosocial, cognitive, and social identity, because these terms are in common use in the student development literature; and epistemological, interpersonal, and intrapersonal as they are used by Kegan, 1994, Baxter Magolda, e.g., 2001, and King and Baxter Magolda. Collectively each set of terms represents holistic development; individually, both interpersonal and intrapersonal are components of psycho-social and social identity development, and vice versa.)

We focus on three specific implications related to student development theory. First is the importance of incorporating contemporary perspectives of fluidity, performativity, and salience in theory development and use, particularly related to multiple social identities. The reconceptualization of the model of multiple dimensions of identity (Jones & McEwen, 2000) and the voices of lesbian college students from Abes and Jones’s study (2004) illustrate the great fluidity and varying salience of students’ multiple identities and the performative nature of students’ identity. Abes and Jones captured the ways in which identity salience changed for participants in their study, often depending on contextual influences and participants’ meaning-making capacity. The introduction of these ideas, some of which stem from queer theory, suggests the possibility of exploring the role of heteronormativity, and other privileging societal structures, in students’ negotiations of their multiple social identities (Abes, in press).

D’Augelli’s (1994) theory of gay, lesbian, and bisexual identity development is one of the few theories that consider the relationship between societal power structures and the fluidity of identity formation. D’Augelli called for theory development that starts with the assumption that identity is “mutable” and a “dynamic process of interaction and exchange between the individual and the many levels of social collectives during the historical period of her or his life” (p. 330). Similarly, King (1994) drew attention to “complex stage models of development [that] . . . take intraindividual variability into account” (p. 418) and noted complex stage models, according to Rest (1979), “as depicting a much messier and complicated picture of development” (p. 65). Although some researchers have applied D’Augelli’s dynamic theory of sexual orientation development (e.g., Renn & Bilodeau, 2005), student development theory in general has been slow to move in a direction that considers relationships between power structures and the fluidity of development.
The reconceptualized model builds on D’Augelli’s perspective by demonstrating the importance of developmental theories considering contextual influences and the dynamic development of socially constructed identities.

Second is the need to create theories addressing students’ holistic development, that is, the complex and fluid intersection of epistemological (or cognitive), psychosocial, and social identity domains of development. Many student development theories focus primarily on one domain of development, such as psychosocial (e.g., Chickering & Reisser, 1993), cognitive (e.g., Perry, 1981), racial identity (e.g., Helms, 1995), and sexual identity (e.g., McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). A small amount of research and only two contemporary theories, specifically those of Baxter Magolda (2001) and King and Baxter Magolda (2005), have considered the intersection of two or more of these domains of development. This reconceptualization of the model of multiple dimensions of identity (Jones & McEwen, 2000) offers one specific example of incorporating epistemological development with interpersonal and intrapersonal development. Although we acknowledge that empirical theory generation and validation involve significant research endeavors, this reconceptualized model suggests the importance of creating theories, based on diverse samples, that integrate the domains of epistemological, interpersonal, and intrapersonal development. Creating complex holistic developmental models may mark the significant challenge for development of student development theory in the 21st century.

A third implication related to theory is the responsibility of professionals to have an in-depth knowledge of the complexities and holistic aspects of existing theories. Perhaps because many of the current student development theories focus primarily on one domain of development, little attention is paid to other developmental domains incorporated in various theories. We highlight two specific examples of developmental models that are more comprehensive than they appear on the surface. First, although Perry’s (1981) scheme is considered a cognitive–structural development theory, Perry actually named his scheme one of “intellectual and ethical development.” Intellectual development (positions 1-6) corresponds to the epistemological or cognitive domain, but in the ethical domain (commitment within relativism, positions 7-9), Perry extended cognitive development to intrapersonal and interpersonal domains (for instance, commitments about one’s career, lifestyle, values). Second, Helms (1995), in her models of racial identity development for people of color and for White persons, not only addresses the development of the social identity of race, but also incorporates how one processes socioracial information (epistemological domain). Indeed, in both of her racial identity models, Helms stated that “maturation [in racial identity] is triggered by a combination of cognitive–affective complexity within the individual and race-related environmental stimuli” (p. 184). So, in both of these examples, student affairs professionals seem to focus on the central developmental domain (cognitive or racial identity), often to the exclusion of acknowledging and using each theory in its full complexities. The incorporation of meaning making in the model of multiple dimensions of identity (Jones & McEwen, 2000) illustrates the value of complex models incorporating more than one domain. It is noteworthy that some current theories, such as Perry’s and Helms’s, are more complex than how they may be used in practice.
Challenges and Directions for Designing Research on Multiple Identities

Important to an understanding of multiple and intersecting dimensions of identity is discussion about the difficulty in studying complexity in social identity development. Weber (1998), in her presentation of a conceptual framework for understanding the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality, wrote:

When we say that race, gender, and sexuality are social constructs, not fixed biological traits, we also mean that we cannot fully capture their meaning in everyday life in the way that social scientists often attempt to do by employing them as variables in traditional quantitative research. When race, gender, and sexuality are treated as discrete variables, individuals are typically assigned a single location along a dimension, which is defined by a set of presumably mutually exclusive and exhaustive categories. (p. 8)

However, designing studies that capture the complexity of inhabiting multiple locations simultaneously is difficult (McCall, 2005). Participants in those studies may not understand that their social identities are continuously shaped by systems of race, class, gender, and sexuality (Weber). Without this context, they perceive some dimensions of their identities as less salient, at different times and under differing circumstances. Integrating the meaning-making filter into the model helps to understand these apparent differences in self-perceptions. For instance, transitional meaning-making capacity provides one explanation for the discrepancy between Carmen's statements that no relationship existed between her sexual orientation and ethnicity, and the stories she shared in which the two were intertwined.

Still, research on multiple identities seems to privilege the researchers’ points of view and interpretation at the expense of the participants’ lived experiences. In studies of identity, researchers necessarily point participants in a specific direction with their line of questioning. Abes and Jones (2004) were aware of this possibility in their study and explained to participants that they need not discuss dimensions of their identity they did not believe were salient to their sense of self or to which they gave little thought. Nevertheless, the questioning prompted thinking and often the sharing of stories the participants might not have considered relevant to their sense of self absent the prompting. Despite best attempts, the difference between imposing and understanding became complicated as the participants’ stories sometimes belied their assertions regarding lack of salience of some identity dimensions (Abes, in press; Abes & Jones).

Some of the limitations of this study suggest areas for further research. As with Jones and McEwen’s (2000) model, the possibilities for the updated model are based on a developmental snapshot of a student’s journey toward self-authorship. Longitudinal research will provide a more comprehensive exploration of the relationships between meaning-making capacity and perceptions of relationships among multiple dimensions of identity. Although not in the context of multiple identities, Torres and Baxter Magolda (2004) illustrate the rich understanding of social identities that emerges from longitudinal research.

Likewise, the data upon which these illustrations are drawn were the stories of 10 women who identified as lesbian. Although the interviews with these women included stories about multiple dimensions of their identity, the focus was on perceptions of their sexual orientation identity; other dimensions were explored primarily in relationship to their
Reconceptualizing Model

sexual orientation. In-depth explorations of other identity dimensions, such as race, ethnicity, and religion, in relationship to one another, might provide a more comprehensive picture of the nature of the meaning-making filter and the relationships among context, meaning making, and content.

Meaning-making capacity is just one possibility for understanding students’ perceptions of the salience and meaning of their social identities. Further research should address other factors that are part of the mix, including the role of particular contextual influences, such as campus culture, and the challenges posed by the particulars of students’ unique multiple identities, which might account for how students perceive certain contextual influences, such as family norms and faith-based expectations.

Professional Practice

Although the purpose of our scholarship is to extend a theoretical model, we also offer a few implications for practice. Including meaning-making capacity in the model of multiple dimensions of identity (Jones & McEwen, 2000) provides a lens to understand more clearly how students see themselves. As illustrated through the stories of Amy, Carmen, and Jacky, the role of meaning-making capacity enables educators to more effectively see students as they see themselves by understanding not only what they perceive their identity to be, but also how they make meaning of their identity dimensions as they do, how they come to perceive identity dimensions as salient or relatively unimportant, and to what degree they understand their social identities as integrated or distinct. Knowing the relationship between meaning-making capacity and identity perceptions provides professionals who work with college students a deeper awareness of how students understand themselves. In turn, this knowledge allows professionals to more effectively engage in meaningful and individualized educational partnerships with students to help them develop a more complex understanding of their identity and the power associated with defining identity for oneself.

Given that complex meaning-making capacity better enables students to self-author (Baxter Magolda, 2001) how they understand their sexual orientation identity and its relationship with other identity dimensions, one practical implication of the reconceptualized multiple identities model is the attention it focuses on helping students create more complex meaning-making filters. In her description of the learning partnership model, Baxter Magolda (2001) offers a strategy for fostering meaning-making capacity through the use of three design principles: validate students’ capacity to know, situate learning in students’ experience, and define learning as mutually constructing meaning. The reconceptualized model of multiple identities suggests the importance of applying these three principles in the context of students’ multiple identities. The many ways this might be accomplished include the incorporation of experiential and reflective components into identity-based academic courses and co-curricular advising, counseling, and programming. Whether in group contexts, such as first-year seminars, community service, or identity-based student organizations and student centers, or in individualized contexts, such as career counseling and academic advising, the design principles can be used to create conditions where multiple truths about identity perceptions are assumed; students bring their own identity-based experiences and stories into the mix to co-construct with peers, advisors, counselors, and instructors new truths, understandings, and perspectives about their sense of self.

Along with meaning making, another key consideration in understanding students’
multiple identities is for student affairs professionals to acknowledge and understand the nature of the contextual influences. One responsibility of professionals is to know and be aware of the campus culture and how the culture relates to students’ representation and development of their multiple identities. By way of example, saliency of sexual orientation for a lesbian college student might depend on campus culture. For instance, sexual orientation might be more (or less) salient for a student at a women’s college that has a feminist culture and support for lesbian students than for a student attending a public research institution in a conservative state with little visible support for students who are not heterosexual. Also, the nature of each dimension of one’s identity might play a role in the salience of the other dimensions. A Latina student, for example, might perceive family influences important as a result of values associated with her culture (Torres, 2003) as well as her meaning-making complexity (Torres & Baxter Magolda, 2004). Further, student affairs professionals should consider students’ meaning-making capacity in relation to campus culture and other contextual influences. For example, students may not always apply their full meaning-making capacity to all aspects of their identity, in part a result of contextual influences. For instance, a White student who is a complex meaning-maker might not make meaning of her racial identity in a complex manner if the contextual influences by which she is surrounded have not yet caused her to recognize her racial privilege (Helms, 1992).

The reconceptualized model not only draws attention to fostering complexity in students’ self-perceptions of their multiple identities but also serves as a reminder of the importance of professionals developing their own meaning-making capacity. As student affairs professionals work with college students to help them develop more complex and empowered identities, it is important that professionals develop toward self-authoring their own multiple identities. Similar to Helms’s (1995) discussion of racial identity in interpersonal environments, the more complex professionals’ meaning-making capacity and self-understanding, the more effectively professionals can understand and foster the identity development of college students. Thus, an implication of this reconceptualized model integrating multiple identities and meaning-making capacities suggests the importance of professionals understanding themselves and engaging in and reflecting on contexts where the way they understand their own identities is challenged (McEwen, 2003).

CONCLUSION

This reconceptualized model incorporating meaning-making capacity into the model of multiple dimensions of identity (Jones & McEwen, 2000), based on Abes and Jones’s (2004) study, provides an illustration of the integration of the multiple facets of college students’ development. Perhaps this model and that of King and Baxter Magolda (2005) suggest directions for a new generation of student development theory formulation and research. Models of students’ holistic development and ways to integrate students’ cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal development offer the potential for more complex understanding of college students’ development and for designing programs and environments to enhance the complexities of students’ development.

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