

Student development: Applying theory to student employees

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Applying theory is a very tough thing to do – in any discipline. Theorists think in the abstract. Appliers have to think both abstractly and concretely. If you want to apply theory, you have to understand the abstract and move it to the concrete and vice versa.

This article describes how I have applied student development theory to student employees. It isn't the only way, just one way that works. I have been using this system for about nine years, and each year brings more refinement and better results.

Both formal and informal assessment demonstrates the results. In informal assessment, the results are measured three ways. The first is the level of acceptance the program or experience receives. This could be measured by the amount of commitment a student employee has to the organization or the lack of resistance in the form of devious yes-man-ship, or malicious compliance in relating to his or her supervisor.

The second is the amount of demand that the program or experience receives. The numbers of students applying to work in the union indicate the amount of demand. This could also be measured by the level of demand for student employees when they graduate.

The third is the absence of negative feedback about student employees from customers and other employees. Some negative feedback will always occur; however, if it is frequent or results in negative consequences to the organization, then quality is not occurring.

For the purposes of this article, the basis of my application is Chickering's Theory of Student Development. Chickering (1969) has identified seven "Dimensions of Human Development":

- **Developing Competence:** The confidence individuals have "in their ability to cope with what comes and to achieve successfully what they set out to do."
- **Managing Emotions:** An awareness of personal feelings and recognition of how they connect with potential actions. Development of a larger

range of fully expressed feelings with new and more useful patterns of expression and control.

- **Developing Autonomy:** Freedom from continual needs for reassurance, affection, and approval. Knowledge of how many things one can do on his or her own.
- **Establishing Identity:** An understanding of “Who I am” and what it means to be male or female. The confidence in one’s ability to maintain his or her own identity in relationships with others.
- **Freeing Interpersonal Relationships:** The ability to manage one’s relationships and develop a sense of tolerance for a wide range of persons.
- **Clarifying Purposes:** Formulation of plans and priorities that integrate avocational interests, vocational plans, and general lifestyle considerations.
- **Developing Integrity:** The ability to make one’s values more personal and more human and to develop congruence between beliefs and actions. (These definitions are from Education and Identity by Arthur Chickering and were adapted by Kathleen Allen.)

If these vectors are translated into goals, they become the outcomes we hope for in our work with student employees.

Chickering’s vectors are a little like apple pie, motherhood, and the American flag. Few could disapprove of them. Figuring out how to achieve these goals and how they relate to everyday actions is the difficult part.

The problem is that the goals seem too far away. My solution was to bring them closer to what I do by identifying the skills a person needs in order to achieve Competence, Freeing Interpersonal Relationships, Clarifying Purposes, etc. The assumption is that if individuals can achieve these skills, then they will achieve the goals of student development.

Skill lists for the goals of Competence and Freeing Interpersonal Relationships follow:

Developing Competence: A student would have to do the following successfully most of the time: (1) manage finances; (2) take initiative in learning new skills and knowledge; (3) analyze situations, make decisions, develop and implement a plan and follow through on the plan; and (4) handle the stress that goes along with achieving tasks.

Freeing Interpersonal Relationships: A student would have to do the following successfully most of the time: (1) initiate, maintain, and handle change in relationships; (2) communicate both verbally and nonverbally – actively listen, observe, and have verbal and non-verbal action be congruent;

(3) take a risk, handle stress, and relate to people who are different; and (4) analyze, decide, plan, and follow through on commitments.

With this format, I could see how I could teach these skills through my supervision and training of student employees. I could see not only how to teach these skills, but also how the whole operation could benefit by having student employees who could perform these skills. Employees (students or not) skilled in all these areas can certainly make your job much easier and can also increase the quality of your programs and services. All in all, that's not a bad return for applying student development theory!

Life Skills Model

In applying this approach to student employees, I noticed that a set of skills needed to achieve each of the goals of student development seemed to recur. Skills are defined as knowledge, understanding, and application gained by special experience or a regular program of training or apprenticeship. I began a list of these skills. To get on the list, each skill had to be fundamental and not divisible by any other skill. Other skills could be derived from combinations of these basic skills, but these basic skills could not be a combination of other skills. (See Appendix A for a list of these skills and their definitions.) A person accomplished in each of these skills could do anything more successfully, including getting a job, raising a family, choosing a career, or even retiring early. The transferability of these skills make them valuable not only in work, but in social, volunteer, and "life" situations as well. Consequently, the skills came to be known as "life skills."

I then asked personnel managers across the country to identify the criteria they use in selecting and promoting employees. I wanted to see if the skills I had identified as leading to student development goals would be useful to students after graduation. The research supported the skill approach as very helpful to individuals in getting jobs and being promoted.

Lastly, I checked that each "life skill" reflected the way people seem to develop and revised the list accordingly. For example, people accomplished at oral communication are not always adept at non-oral communication (listening and observing), and vice versa. Therefore, oral and non-oral communication needs to be viewed as separate skills rather than as one skill of communication. One advantage of this separation is seen in the teaching phase. A teacher can give more specific feedback by reinforcing the skill a person is good at while working on the one that needs improvement. For example, people who have been told they aren't good at communication probably aren't good at oral communication, but may be

better than average at non-oral communication. Separating communication into two skills lets a person know what he or she is good at, as well as areas that need improvement. This gives the student a clearer goal of growth.

Linking daily routine to theory

The life skills are a link to student development goals. Persons accomplished in the life skill areas most of the time have more success in whatever they try. Given enough success, an individual eventually develops in autonomy, competence, identity, clarifying purposes, managing emotions, and freeing interpersonal relationships. If Chickering's Dimensions of Human Development are the goals of student development, then the life skills are the objectives to achieve those goals. The advantage of using the life skills as objectives is that their accomplishment can be measured by the actual behavior of the student. For example, to measure the skill of situational analysis in a student, you could observe the following behaviors in a student:

1. Ability to list the strengths and weaknesses of a service area.
2. Willingness to take the time to evaluate and try to understand what aspects contribute to the success or failure of a program or service.
3. Ability to identify alternative actions or ways of approaching a problem before making a final decision.
4. Ability to develop criteria to be used in decision making or policy formulation, based on an anticipation of present and future problems or needs.

The absence of certain behaviors can also serve as measures. There might be an absence of:

1. After-the-fact problems caused by a lack of research or a failure to anticipate the consequences.
2. Mistakes in hiring or program selection due to lack of analysis.

This ability to measure results takes the ambiguity out of developing students. It gives you direct feedback which helps you see what helps and what hinders a student's development.

The life skills are also the link to everyday routine. In this model the life skills are the objectives to the goals of student development, and the daily duties become the action plan for achieving these objectives. This is usually where staff members start to panic because they can't see how they can develop students and complete all their other duties. The fallacy in this reaction is the assumption that one takes away from the other! What actually happens is that staff members get more done in less time. This happens because students become more competent as they are trained in the life skills

and staff members can delegate more decision making, planning, and implementation to them without the worry of major mistakes. Staff members who supervise unskilled employees spend more of their time leaning up others' mistakes. This model refocuses where staff members spend their time. Instead of reacting to problems, they invest their time in selecting, training, and supervising.

Using life skills in the selection process

It makes a lot of sense to hire the best student employees you can. The old adage, "You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear" applies to employees. If you hire students with good potential and skills, your additional training and development will reap more rewards. If you hire a lot of sow's ears, the best you can hope for is better sow's ears!

I use an experience- and skill-based approach in the selection process. Because prospective student employees rarely have direct or extensive employment experience, traditional hiring standards, such as experience directly related to a union position, do not apply.

The first step in implementing a life skills approach to hiring is to identify skills required for different union jobs. For example, a recreation center desk worker needs to be able to establish relationships, communicate well, analyze, decide what to do (problem solving), manage finances, and have a tolerance for stress. Of course, other skills are welcome, but these six are knockout factors. A student who doesn't have those skills won't get hired for that position.

The interview then is used to assess the student's skill level; it helps to predict whether the student has the necessary skills for the job. The interview also provides a means to evaluate a student's strengths, weaknesses, and past work experience and to gather information about the potential employee's preferred supervision style and motivations.

Figure 1 Life Skills

Situational Analysis: The ability to evaluate, assess, diagnose, generate alternatives, and anticipate needs. This skill is used when student employees:

- Anticipate needs that affect your organization
- Evaluate a service or operation
- Develop a policy or procedure
- Analyze and gather information before making a decision

Decision Making: The ability to be objective and logical in making a decision, to be able to prioritize, take responsibility for decisions, and direct action resulting from one's decisions. This skill is used when student employees:

- Make final hiring decisions
- Make decisions on how to prioritize their tasks
- Develop recommendations and decide how to handle a dissatisfied client or what to do when they run out of supplies
- Vote on a policy or procedure
- Decide on goals, objectives, or action plans

Planning: The ability to develop informal and formal statements of goals, plan potential uses of resources, and be able to identify the criteria for success in the goal. This skill is used when student employees:

- Set organizational or personal goals and objectives
- Plan a meeting or other interactions

Implementation: The ability to plan the steps and time frame needed to accomplish a task; to select and organize appropriate human and material resources and delegate tasks. This skill is used when student employees:

- Recruit people for a task
- Delegate a task
- Plan the specific steps for accomplishing a task or an objective
- Plan the time frame for accomplishing a job
- Carry out an assignment

Follow Through: The ability to stay on the project until completion, to be persistent, to recheck progress of others and help solve problems as they arise during this phase of task accomplishment. This skill is used when student employees:

- Accomplish a goal or objective which is extended over a period of time or distance
- Try to rescue a project that has been incompletely implemented or planned
- Follow up on a task they have delegated
- Readjust a timeline due to external problems or unrealistic time frames

Financial Management: The ability to plan, develop, and implement a budget. This skill is used when student employees:

- Develop and follow a bid process
- Develop and implement a budget
- Perform a cost analysis of a service area
- Develop a recommendation for an expenditure

- Monitor and evaluate a budget

Communication – Oral: The ability to express oneself with clarity, to make an effective presentation, to think quickly on one's feet, and express it. This skill is used when student employees:

- Express themselves in a one-to-one conversation
- Express themselves in a staff meeting
- Explain a policy decision to a client
- Express themselves in a one-to-group situation

Communication – Non-Oral: The ability to be an effective observer and active listener. This skill is used when student employees:

- Observe and listen in a one-to-one or group situation
- Observe and listen in an interview situation
- Observe group process
- Listen in evaluations or when given instructions on how to do something

Communication – Written: The ability to write a report and handle paper work effectively. This skill is used when student employees:

- Write procedures
- Write reports, job descriptions, goals, policies, etc.

Relationship Building: The ability to initiate, develop, and maintain relationships on a number of levels and in different situations. This skill is used when student employees:

- Build team within a staff
- Establish rapport with clients
- Develop and maintain relationships with other university departments (not alienation people)

Adaptability: Tolerance and acceptance of others; the ability to relate to many types of people, to make transitions fluently, and to be flexible. This skill is used when student employees:

- Build relationships with people who have different values and interests
- Build relationships with people who have different operating styles

Tolerance for Stress: The ability to cope, control emotional reactions, and deal with failure, ambiguity, or success appropriately. This skill is used when student employees:

- Balance classes, personal life, and work
- Remain effective with work commitments during finals and midterms
- Handle irate, rude customers

Initiative: The ability to see an uncompleted task and do the job without being told; to be a self-starter. This skill is used when students employees:

- Develop new policy or revise an existing policy, procedure, etc.

- Learn a new skill
- Are assertive

Tolerance for Risk: The willingness to try something new, experiment, and learn. To be able to make a decision which one hopes will be helpful but is without assurance of success or improvement. This skill is used when student employees:

- Make a decision that doesn't have a guarantee of success
- Try a new behavior that they don't know will work
- Share opinions they aren't sure will be received well

For each of the life skills, I have developed a list of interview questions. By comparing a student's answers with the student's performance on the job, the questions' validity and reliability in helping identify skills are tested constantly. The following are examples of such interview questions:

Situational analysis

1. What do you think your strengths and weaknesses are? This is a tricky question. On the surface it directly asks a person to analyze. However, some people have been told never to mention weaknesses in an interview and would not demonstrate an ability to evaluate themselves critically. If you use this question, it may need to be cross-checked with another question.
2. How would you evaluate an organization that you presently work for or volunteer in? A strong answer would balance strengths and weaknesses. The level of depth in the answer reflects the quality of analysis that has taken place. Freshmen tend not to analyze in much depth. This skill seems to increase with experience and age.

Tolerance for stress

This is the ability to remain calm and confident in a crisis or unexpected situation. Although this definition implies that an individual never panics, it is important to note that there are appropriate times to panic. Calmly walking into a union office and announcing in a low voice that a vicious bear is roaming the halls is not an appropriate response to the situation. On the other hand, a person with a high stress tolerance can be effective and make quality decisions even when excited.

1. How do you act when you have a deadline approaching?
2. What were the biggest pressures of your past job? How did you handle the pressures when they were at their peak?

3. Describe how you decide what you need to do (set priorities) when you are faced with apparently more tasks than there is time to do?

The third question helps measure decision-making skills in a stressful situation. Check how a job candidate behaves in the interview. Although we try to make the candidate feel at ease, the interview will still be a stressful situation. Does the individual have the ability to communicate and think logically? If not, it's possible that the person will react similarly in a stressful work situation.

For each job I identify a short series of questions that provides an interview base. The usual interview takes 10-15 minutes. The trick is to prioritize what you need to assess and ask those questions.

Although this process may at first seem complex, it becomes routine with practice and results in higher quality student employees. You also get a better assessment of the areas a student needs more supervision in because of skill deficiencies.

Using the model in training and supervision

I combine training and supervision because good supervision is a form of training. The two functions go together; they just happen at different times. John Naisbitt in his latest book *The Year Ahead* states: "In the '80s, we are moving from the manager who is supposed to have all the answers and tells everyone what to do, to the manager whose role is to create a nourishing environment for personal growth. We have to increasingly think about the manager as teacher, as mentor, as resource, as developer of human potential" (1984, p. 20).

I use five strategies to teach life skills to student employees. The nice thing about these strategies is that they coincide with what you normally do.

The difference is in the way you do them and the level of consciousness while doing them!

The first strategy is formal instruction. This involves any formal training such as workshops, classes, or even conferences. This is the teaching strategy we depend on most; however, ten percent or less of the time spent in teaching situations is devoted to formal training. The goal of this application model is to use the other 90 percent more effectively.

The second strategy is role modeling. In "Behavior Modeling: The 'Monkey See, Monkey Do' Principle," Ron Zemke (1982) explains: "Modeling, or observational learning, is the way we learn from others' experiences. It takes place in two steps: acquisition and performance. In the first step, we see others act, and we acquire a mental picture of the act, and

its consequences. After the mental image is acquired, we perform or try out the act ourselves. If we find the consequences of imitating the model rewarding, we're likely to act that way again.”

As a supervisor, I consciously role model the life skills. Thinking of yourself as an active role model is at first intimidating because it makes you acutely aware of how your behavior affects others positively or negatively.

This may be scary, but the alternative is worse. By being unaware of your role modeling, you might be modeling the exact opposite of what you are saying.

There are four steps to make role modeling an effective teaching strategy:

1. Gather a knowledge base of the skill area you want to model. For example, if you want to role model effective decision making, then you need to know what it is. Read as many books and articles on decision-making theory as you can.
2. Identify the specific behaviors that indicate competence in the skill area. This helps you picture how you want to behave when modeling the skill and helps you recognize these skills in others.
3. Practice the behaviors and constantly try to improve your skill in this area.
4. Make the students aware of your modeling. Let them know when you are using the skill and how developing that skill might help them.

By role modeling the life skills, you will increase your own effectiveness as an administrator or supervisor. If you model financial management skills, your union budget will be well managed. If you model oral communication, you will be able to present your ideas effectively in meetings and public. If you model planning, the goals and objectives of your union will be sound. In other words, you will be a very effective administrator! Not a bad byproduct of becoming a better teacher, is it?

The next strategy is collaboration. This is when people learn and develop skills together while working on a program, project, or task. A good collaboration occurs when the participants are active in both the teaching and the learning process. Each participant has something to teach and something to learn. The collaboration brings people of diverse skills together so that they can complete a project while learning from each other.

Collaboration can happen between you and another student, or it can occur between two student employees. There are three prerequisites to using the collaboration strategy:

1. The ability to assess accurately your own and your employee's individual strengths and weaknesses. This is necessary so that individuals with complementary skills can be matched.
2. Knowledge of the organizational structure and how people can be assigned to work together on different projects.
3. An open attitude toward personal learning. If you believe you have nothing to learn from a student, this strategy will not work. Development occurs with the exchange of learning.

The fourth strategy is informal instruction. This is defined as any one-to-one interaction in which there is an exchange of information or feedback which leads to a student's better understanding of a theory, model, concept, or skill. Informal instruction can happen anywhere in a college union- at the water fountain, at lunch, in the hallway, or even in your office. It often takes the form of feedback on the quality of students' decisions or recommendations they are having. But it could also include those rambling conversations about how you learned a political lesson in your first job. Reinforcing a person's behavior when he or she does something right is one of the best ways to get an individual to do it again! Many organizations, however, seem to work under the principle that "if you don't hear anything negative, you're doing all right." This isn't enough if you want to develop student employees.

The key to informal instruction is to make better use of all your contacts with employees. This doesn't mean that every conversation needs to be instructional, but it does emphasize that you can make conversations worthwhile.

The last strategy I use is less concrete than the others. I call it creating the environment. Development can be affected by the environment of the union. The environment includes four areas.

The first is the level of expectations you have of your student employees. If you expect students not to make good decisions, you won't hold them accountable in evaluations or informal feedback sessions when they fail. If you expect students to be responsible, you'll confront them when they aren't. If you don't expect students to be responsible, then you won't confront them because they are meeting your expectation! Confrontation is a form of feedback. You need to reinforce a person who does something right and confront a person who does something wrong.

The next area in environment is the organizational structure. People cannot grow without being given responsibilities. If the organization is structured so that students are not given the responsibility to make decisions

and are not held accountable for them, all other teaching strategies are undermined.

This is where you can role model your tolerance for risk! Students will never learn how to make decisions if you don't let them test and acquire this skill. This doesn't have to mean catastrophe. You can ask a student who hasn't yet proved competence in this skill to develop a recommendation and present it to you before any action occurs. This gives you a chance to spot the wrong answer and send the student back to the drawing board for another recommendation. Think of this as a form of casualty insurance in the delegation process. When students have proven their decision-making abilities, you can let them make the decisions in that area of competence. This frees you to concentrate on another area.

The next thing to check in your organization's structure is how many things you do yourself. If you make all the decisions, do all the planning, observation, and analysis, then you will learn and grow. But your student employees will not. We are all tempted to do it ourselves because it's easier or because we think we can do it better than the students and would like to show them genius at work! The challenge is to develop your ability to let someone else learn what you know so well. This is called creating opportunities for development.

The next dimension of the environment is the amount of challenge and support in your organization. For growth to occur, challenge and support need to be in equal proportions.

Challenge comes in many forms. It can be greater responsibility, more tasks, a higher level of quality expected, or greater perceived difficulty of a task. Remember, what's routine and boring to you may be a challenge for someone else!

Support can be information, training, encouragement, resources, supplies, realistic timelines, and help in problem solving. The key is that challenge and support both need to be present. Too much challenge and not enough support can result in panic. If there is too much support, boredom occurs.

Using the model in evaluations

The final way to implement the life skills model in the student employment system is through the formal evaluation process. The evaluation form should list the life skills as well as the usual job-related skills. This provides an opportunity for students to receive feedback on both their job specific skills (like quality of work and knowledge of policies, etc.) and the

life skills. This often helps students identify specific life skills they want to work on to improve their effectiveness.

Both the student and the supervisor usually fill out the evaluation. The evaluation form defines the life skills and describes the two extremes. This allows employees to assess their own skill levels and to compare those with their supervisor's perceptions. Two examples of the evaluation format of the life skills section follow:

Initiative: The ability to see an uncompleted task and do the job without being told – to be a self-starter.

Strong evidence: Initiates new ideas, projects, etc.

Little evidence: Appears to want to be told what to do and seldom assumes responsibility for doing more than is specifically asked.

Planning: The ability to develop an informal statement of goal and plan potential steps.

Strong evidence: He or she proposes ways of completing work or projects before beginning.

Little evidence: Does not establish steps to follow to complete the work.

Students evaluate themselves by checking one of the following: shows little evidence of; shows adequate evidence of; shows good evidence of; or shows strong evidence of. The formal evaluation adds credibility to the value of learning the life skills. It lets students know they will be evaluated on these skills and provides an additional motivation to be more effective.

Summary

If you teach these life skills to the students whom you employ, they will become more effective in their work. The life skills are designed to increase the competence of individuals in a variety of life situations. With their development, students become more valuable employees. They will make better decisions, relate better to people, communicate more clearly, follow through on tasks, and be able to analyze possible options in crises. Students will also have more success in their lives which leads them to achieve Chickering's Dimensions of Human Development.

The college union operation will also benefit directly from developing its students. Students who are more responsible and skilled in their jobs provide higher quality service to the union's clientele. Because the students are learning skills that will benefit them later in life, they will be more motivated in their jobs. This motivation leads to an increased commitment which means less turnover in student staff. All this translates into more time

for the full-time staff to pursue other tasks. The day-to-day duties become teaching strategies. The Life Skills Model will require an initial shift in perspective and some development to implement, but once the system is in place, it probably won't take more time to manage than the process you've been using.

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