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# A New Theory-to-Practice Model for Student Affairs: Integrating Scholarship, Context, and Reflection

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## **Abstract**

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## **Disciplines**

Curriculum and Social Inquiry | Educational Psychology | Higher Education | Student Counseling and Personnel Services

## **Comments**

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### A New Theory-to-Practice Model for Student Affairs: Integrating Scholarship, Context, and Reflection

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*Innovations in Research and Scholarship Feature*

# A New Theory-to-Practice Model for Student Affairs: Integrating Scholarship, Context, and Reflection

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Ezekiel W. Kimball, *Curry College*



*In this article, we synthesize existing theory-to-practice approaches within the student affairs literature to arrive at a new model that incorporates formal and informal theory, institutional context, and reflective practice. The new model arrives at a balance between the rigor necessary for scholarly theory development and the adaptability needed to implement theories. Finally, the model elevates the importance of reflective practice among student affairs professionals as the means to evaluate both formal and informal theories.*

The long-running debate over the nature of theory in the student affairs profession has surfaced once again (Evans & Guido, 2012; Love, 2012). To briefly summarize two well-written and tightly reasoned articles, Love (2012) argued that the connection between formal theories of learning and development—defined as “public, conscious, explicit, and organized conceptions of de-

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financed and related phenomena” (p. 179)—and practice is inherently problematic. Practitioners, Love suggested, utilize informal theories that incorporate their own values, beliefs, and assumptions rather than the formal theories produced by scholars as their guides for action. In rejoinder, Evans and Guido (2012) argued that the use of informal theory without the structured guidance of formal theory is likely to introduce untested and potentially problematic assumptions about the nature of student experience. Formal theory, produced according to the norms of scholarly rigor, is designed to eliminate untested and potentially problematic assumptions from our practice. Although Evans and Guido suggested that informal theory may play a key role in mediating between formal theory and practice, they concluded that practice must be constructed on the basis of formal theory.

We suggest that both Love (2012) and Evans and Guido (2012) are correct in crucial aspects while expanding on each of their arguments: Student affairs professionals have need for both formal and informal theories. The way student affairs professionals think about the connections between formal theory, informal theory, and practice will determine their success as student affairs professionals. More specifically, we suggest that the lack of clear connection between scholarly theory and the way that we adapt it for practice compromises our ability to engage in reflective practice, a required ability for practitioners who hope to use student development theory to inform both the creation of new programs and the modification of existing practices (Schön, 1987). Ideally, such work would be guided by theory-to-practice models, which produce both the rigor and the flexibility needed by student affairs practitioners via the critical examination of both formal and informal theory (Argyris & Schön, 1974; Parker, 1977). However, the textbooks used most frequently to train student affairs practitioners in the use of developmental theory (e.g., Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010) and in professional best practices (e.g., Schuh, Jones, & Harper, 2011) do not provide fully articulated theory-to-practice models. Instead, the authors describe what we refer to as “guiding concepts”—key theoretical insights such as engagement; challenge, support, and readiness; and marginality and mattering that do not explicitly engage the full developmental theories of which they are a part.

In this paper we set forth a foundational understanding of the process of translating theory to practice in student affairs work, provide an overview of existing models or approaches to this translation, and offer our own model. We build upon the work of Parker (1977) and Bensimon (2007) to discuss relationships between formal theories of student learning and development and the informal (or implicit) understanding of the practitioners charged with implementing those theories. We also differentiate between Parker’s use of the word *informal* and Bensimon’s use of the word *implicit*, suggesting that informal theory implies a desirable level of critical consciousness and reflection that implicit theory does not. Next, we review existing models of theory to practice to identify attributes for a model capable of bridging the gap between formal and informal theory. Finally, we present not only a model that builds upon Parker’s and Bensimon’s ideas, but also a call for practitioners to engage in reflection to shape both the informal theories that guide practice and,

eventually, the formal theories that guide our field. Importantly, our model achieves a balance between valuing and honoring the rigorous methods used to develop formal student development theories and the adaptability necessary to apply those theories to the situations within which most student affairs professionals find themselves.

## Types of Theory

It is likely easiest to define *formal theories* by the various named models most student affairs professionals learn about in graduate school; for example, without providing more than a cursory citation, most readers will likely be able to recite the basics of Chickering (1969) or Baxter Magolda (2001). *Informal theory* refers to the theoretical understanding that practitioners have of student learning and development based upon their interpretations of formal theories through the lenses of their own experiences (Parker, 1977). It also functions as a set of guiding values, beliefs, and assumptions of which practitioners are critically aware (Schön, 1987). Carol Gilligan's (1982) thinking on moral development, for example, originated as an informal theory based upon her personal observations of the limitations of Kohlberg's stages of moral development, which she then subjected to rigorous scholarly testing. In contrast, *implicit theory* reflects the values, beliefs, and assumptions that practitioners operationalize in their daily practice—often without awareness that they do so (Bensimon, 2007). According to these definitions then, informal theory is always heavily based on formal theory, but implicit theory is often produced without the guidance of formal theory. As a result, any successful model of theory to practice must attend to issues of rigor and adaptability as well as provide a mechanism to make explicit the hidden values, beliefs, and assumptions that undergird our practice, bringing these attributes into contact with formal theory through reflective practice. In so doing, Bensimon's implicit theories come to resemble the informal theories described by Parker.

Below we build the case for examining theory-to-practice models using two criteria: rigor and adaptability. These two criteria highlight the tension between formal theories and informal theories. Formal theories privilege rigorous procedures during their development and rigorous adherence to the theory in their use; informal theories are about application and adaptation of formal theories to the “real-life” work of student affairs professionals.

## The Adaptability of Informal Theories

Within the field of higher education, Parker (1977) explored the contrasting methods of theory development utilizing the terms *formal* and *informal* theory. Formal theory accords with the scholarly understanding of theory development. For Parker, formal theory was produced and validated primarily through induction, deduction, and statistical modeling. Although new research methodologies and epistemologies have made substantial inroads in changing this understanding, this conception of theory remains normative.

In contrast, informal theory emerges directly from individual human experience and is designed to be useful rather than generalizable (Parker, 1977). It is, at a very basic level, an interpretation of a given environment for use in that environment (Argyris & Schön, 1974). For student affairs professionals, interactions with students, personal beliefs and assumptions, and understandings of relevant institutional factors likely comprise a set of human experiences that shape informal theories. Thus, informal theories vary from person to person. All informal theories, however, share several characteristics. They are heuristic: They represent a pre-established pattern of thought through which new circumstances and understandings can be evaluated based on prior experience. Further, given their heuristic nature, they are designed to be useful in practice rather than universally predictive. As such, they are flexible enough to explain a wide variety of situations and heavily dependent on the judgment of the individual applying the theory.

Parker (1977) also discussed three different levels of theory application—the institutional level, within smaller groups of students, and the individual level—suggesting a different balance between formal and informal theories works better at each level. For Parker, formal theories worked best at the institutional level when differences between individuals were less important than generating overall predictions for the population or in relatively homogenous groups where differences in outcomes were likely to be minimal. In contrast, informal theories were most useful with heterogeneous groups of students or at the level of the individual. Informal theories thus function less as a predictive tool and more as an interpretive lens. Since Parker was focused on ensuring that student affairs practitioners develop the most useful theoretical understanding possible, his work generally favored informal theory.

### **Scholarly Rigor and the Development of Formal Theories**

Bensimon (2007) described the dual nature of this long-running tension between theory and practice: a lack of a clear theory-to-practice connection, she argued, resulted in “the invisibility of practitioners in the discourse on student success” (p. 443). This invisibility, Bensimon asserted, was problematic for scholarship, as practitioner knowledge represents a valuable source of information about student experiences and the success of existing theories. At the same time, practitioner invisibility rendered it difficult for scholars to think about the actual implications of their work on the daily lives of students—since practitioners represent the likely delivery mechanism for many scholarly recommendations.

Bensimon (2007) further asserted that the lack of integration between the work of scholars and practitioners led to the uncritical acceptance of assumptions that perpetuate rather than alleviate inequalities. She argued that

practitioners in higher education, over time and through a variety of experiences, have developed implicit theories about students: why they succeed, why they fail, and what, if anything, they can do to reverse failure. I say “implicit theories” because practitioners for the

most part are likely not aware of what knowledge or experiences constitute their sensemaking and how the judgments they make about a phenomenon such as student success or failure are shaped by their sensemaking. (p. 446)

Thus, Bensimon (2007) argued that a lack of scholarly attention leads to the creation of implicit theories. Implicit theories are based on loosely considered *assumptions* about student behavior rather than critical consideration of *scholarly knowledge* or the lessons learned through *reflective practice*. The lack of critical reflexivity inherent in implicit theory making can lead to the internalization of undesirable assumptions about student experience, development, and learning that foster negative outcomes. As a result, Bensimon suggested the need for a careful examination of implicit theory and for formal theory that is more focused on practice. By attending to each, higher education researchers can produce work that is more accurate and useful. In making this claim, Bensimon (2007) made both scholars and practitioners responsible for the theory-to-practice conversion—a notable departure from the previously separate spheres of formal and informal theory.

Bensimon's (2007) work demonstrates the complicated nature of the theory-to-practice problem in higher education. It is the product both of ambiguity around the epistemological and methodological origins of theoretical knowledge—referenced by Bensimon as “implicit theories”—and the lack of a coherent vision for how the leap from theory to practice might best be made.

## Existing Models and Approaches for Applying Theory to Practice

Theory-to-practice models must assume the basic human ability to make meaning of new situations, take action, and reflect upon that action to develop a working model of the world moving forward. This process, according to Argyris and Schön (1974), is “theory-in-use” and takes into account “assumptions about self, others, the situation, and the connections among action, consequence, and situation” (p. 7). Unfortunately, the theory-to-practice literature in student affairs is either too exacting, too fragmentary, or both, to be of much use in addressing the challenges raised by Argyris and Schön. We believe these problems are directly attributable to the tension between rigor and adaptability discussed above, as well as the failure to directly confront the tension between formal and informal theory brought to light by Love (2012) and Evans and Guido (2012).

The following section reviews some of the existing theory-to-practice models, with an eye toward the balance of formal and informal, rigor and adaptability. The existing models group neatly into two types: formal process models and guiding concepts approaches. We posit that the formal process models focus on the rigor, while the guiding concepts focus more on adaptability of theories to practice.

## Formal Process Models Focusing on Rigor

The first of these theories designed specifically for student development practitioners was created by Morrill, Oetting, and Hurst in 1974, subsequently revised by the authors in 1980, and revised by Evans in 1987. Initially, Morrill and colleagues (1974) suggested that the theory-to-practice conversion involved three considerations: (a) the target of the intervention—ranging from individual to institution; (b) the purpose of the intervention—ranging from reactive to developmental; and (c) the method of intervention—ranging from personal contact to the use of media. These areas of consideration were reframed slightly by Evans (1987) as *target* (individual or institutional), *type* (planned or responsive), and *approach* (explicit or implicit) but remained functionally the same as those articulated by Morrill and colleagues.

Each work (i.e., Evans, 1987; Morrill et al., 1974) held that developmental theory can be applied directly and indirectly in the short- or long-term. These authors did not, however, discuss the importance of context in the selection and application of theory. In their later work, Morrill and colleagues (1980) emphasized that their model was rooted in ecological development theory: In this regard, their treatment of primary and associational groups was particularly reminiscent of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) microsystems and exosystems respectively. However, even with recent resurgence of ecological approaches to development (Renn, 2003, 2004; Renn & Arnold, 2003), developmental ecology's limited representation in the student development literature (Evans et al., 2010) suggests that current practitioners would have trouble applying a theory-to-practice model with underlying ecological assumptions without a more detailed explication of the process involved.

Building from a different theoretical tradition, Rodgers and Widick (1980) proposed a grounded formal model for theory to practice. They articulated a seven-phase process: (a) the selection of a problem faced by a specific population in a specific context; (b) the selection of appropriate and useful scholarly theories; (c) the translation of those theories into the context of practice; (d) the formulation of goals for the intervention and/or program; (e) the design of the intervention and/or program; (f) application of the intervention and/or program; and (g) evaluation of the intervention and/or program—including possible gaps between the formal theories utilized and the theories-in-use employed by staff. Rodgers and Widick, thus, addressed the importance of institutional context in the selection and application of formal theories.

Although Rodgers and Widick's (1980) model addressed the concerns regarding context that arose from Morrill, Oetting, and Hurst's (1974, 1980) model, it too has serious limitations. The Rodgers and Widick model requires an extensive knowledge of student development theories for full application, which may make it difficult to apply for those practitioners for whom implicit theory is the basis of their practice. Stage (1994) addressed this expertise problem by proposing a process-driven model of theory-to-practice translation. Suggesting that knowledge of developmental theory should be driven by professional context, Stage indicated that the problem being addressed via theory and the theory being selected to address that problem should be informed by one another.

Further, Stage moved to ground the theory-to-practice translation through the selection of a single, specific case for application. Once this selection is made, Stage suggested the need to plan carefully and educate student affairs staff members who need to share the same understanding of theory to practice in order for the plan to be successful. Once this work is complete, the intervention should be implemented and its results evaluated to determine their efficacy. As a whole, Stage's process model made notable improvements over previous models. Its full utility was hampered, however, by an abridged discussion of how theory should be applied and by its lack of acceptance in student affairs—not having been featured in student development or student affairs textbooks (Evans et al., 2010; Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998; Schuh et al., 2011).

Nonetheless, Stage's (1994) model served as the basis for the case analysis model presented by Stage and Dannells (2000), which is not explicitly a theory-to-practice model but arguably can be used as such. According to their model, theory to practice would consist of a series of eight decisions: (a) identification of actionable issues, (b) gathering of available key information, (c) collection of additional information that is not readily available, (d) identification of key persons in the case, (e) identification of relevant theories, (f) the identification of alternative understandings, (g) analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of all alternatives, and (h) selection of a course of action. Since the model was intended for *ex-post-facto* analysis, Stage and Dannells could not have been expected to include an assessment feedback loop. They can, however, be critiqued for again describing the theoretical grounding in step five as "the most individual of those [steps] in case-study analysis" (Stage & Dannells, p. 43). In emphasizing adaptability, this model seemingly contradicts the basic tenets of formal theory. The model is notable, however, for suggesting a theory-to-practice model that incorporates rigor and adaptability, moving process models away from their strict adherence to rigor at the expense of adaptability.

### From Formal Models to Guiding Statements

In an effort to get at usefulness more directly, recent attempts to discuss theory to practice have increasingly focused on the individual interpretive act—eschewing models of application for discussions of important considerations when evaluating theory. For example, Brown and Barr (1990) presented little in the way of a formal model—suggesting only the need for awareness of theory and context before implementation and evaluation. Holding that theory-to-practice efforts are hampered by a lack of consensus, a lack of knowledge, a lack of felt need for theory, and the desire for a more holistic approach, Brown and Barr suggested that scholars should examine the needs of practitioners more critically if theory to practice is a goal of scholarship—a call echoed by Bensimon (2007).

Other recent theory-to-practice discussions attempt to heighten student affairs practitioners' sensitivity to the myriad issues that interfere with a wholesale application of any single theory to practice with heterogeneous groups of students. Recent writings focusing on the multiple dimensions of identity (e.g., Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007; Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009) as well

as the increasing diversity within our student populations rightfully highlight the importance of adapting theory—or parts of theories—when attempting to translate theory into practice. We have grouped these recent writings under the umbrella term, guiding statements, as authors have attempted to increase practitioners' sensitivity to individual student and student-group differences that make theory application difficult.

In the first iteration of their student development theory textbook, Evans and her colleagues (1998) discussed many of the formal models reviewed in the previous section. The discussion of these process models was followed by sections on key concepts in theory application such as Lewin's interactionist perspective, Sanford's challenge and support, Astin's involvement, Schlossberg's marginality and mattering, and Rendón's validation. Presented as a largely compatible theoretical framework, the implication was that these concepts represent a workable translation of theory to practice. Appearing in the revised text (Evans et al., 2010), the updated theory-to-practice chapter omitted entirely the discussion of past models, focusing the discussion on using theory to accommodate individual and student-group differences—the use of guiding statements.

Finally, recent discussions that apply social theory to student development theories broadened the discussion of dangers of formal theory application and heightened student affairs practitioners' awareness of the between-group differences that make formal theory application difficult when working with traditionally underserved and underrepresented groups of students. Applying a critical lens, for instance, Patton, McEwen, Rendón, and Howard-Hamilton (2007) critiqued current student development theories for the "omission of race, racism, and racial realities" (p. 39). These authors reminded student affairs practitioners that the research serving as the foundation for traditional student development theories excluded Students of Color and omitted any nuanced understanding of intersections of multiple identities. Likewise, Tanaka (2002) suggested that student development theories had not kept pace with developments in social theory being produced in related fields such as philosophy, psychology, sociology, and anthropology. Key among his concerns were issues of marginality, hegemony, knowledge production, validity, and social justice praxis raised by theories from critical traditions (including critical feminist, queer, and race theories) and the challenges raised by relativist epistemologies (including post-structuralism and post-modernism). In keeping with the guiding statements perspective, these authors offer no formal process for applying theory to practice, but suggest that practitioners question existing theories, incorporate a critical race theory perspective into daily practice, and be aware of their own racial identity and accompanying racial biases.

The movement toward the use of guiding statements in lieu of formal theory-to-practice models represents a more reasonable approximation of the way individuals go about making meaning of theory. Guiding statements cannot, we believe, replace models of theory to practice but should be thought of as a notable expansion. A new model that is capable of attending to the formal theory focus of theory-to-practice models while also focusing on the practitioner meaning-making represented by informal theory is needed. We propose such a model below.

## A New Model of Theory to Practice

The model we propose is based on several assumptions that flow from earlier models and our review of the theory-to-practice literature. We assume a need for rigor and adaptability in theory-to-practice models; that is, we strive to find a balance between models of formal theory application and the necessary adaptability of informal theories. As with Parker's (1977) description, the balance between formal and informal theories changes as one moves along the model—privileging informal theory when practitioners move from thinking about theory in the abstract to working directly with individual students. Drawing from the initial work of Morrill et al. (1974), we place the theory-to-practice translation within an institutional context. Finally, in keeping with the importance placed on reflective practice by Schön (1987), the proposed model incorporates formal feedback loops designed to foster practitioner reflection on how well their informal theories guided their individual work with students and to suggest the importance of assessing the institutional context regularly in light of changes to practitioners' informal theory assumptions.

### The Parts of the Model

The model suggests four components to the process of translating theory to practice: formal theory, institutional context, informal theory, and practice. Based on the assumptions outlined above, the model also consists of two feedback loops, beginning with a reflection on practice that informs informal theory and formal theory, respectively. The model is presented graphically in Figure 1. Following discussion of each model component, we provide a bulleted list of points that practitioners may wish to consider for each step of the process of translating formal theory for use in practice.

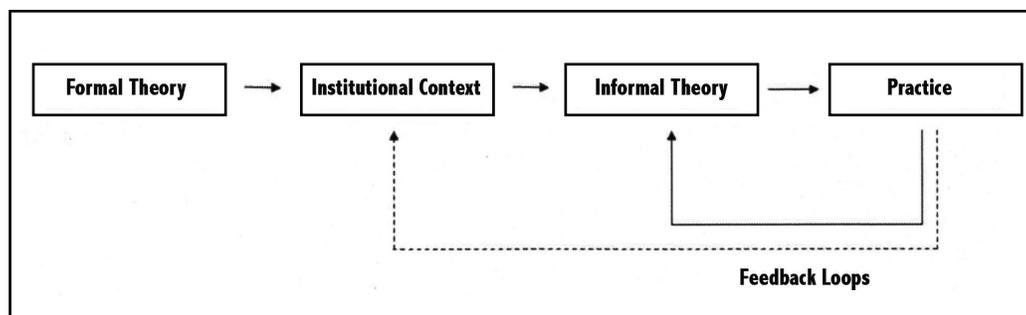


Figure 1. Model of theory-to-practice translation.

**Formal theory.** The critiques and limitations of current student development theories raised by authors like Patton and her colleagues (2007) notwithstanding, good professional student affairs practice is built upon a foundation of formal theories (Evans et al., 2010; Evans & Guido, 2012). Student affairs practitioners must have a broad-based, advanced education in these theories that allows for an informed, eclectic approach to theory selection at all administrative levels (Evans et al.). An understanding of formal theories provides for a common language and shared understanding of student development goals among professionals. The importance of education in formal theories has long been reinforced by the CAS Standards (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education [CAS], 2009) that guide professional preparation programs in student affairs and recently reinforced by the inclusion of student learning and development as a core professional competency in the jointly agreed upon competencies and standards document released by the American College Personnel Association and NASPA–Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (2010).

At this stage of the theory-to-practice translation process practitioners should inquire:

- What formal theories are part of the shared knowledge among staff members?
- What new understandings of formal theory are provided by the scholarly community (e.g., articles, books, conference presentations)?
- What are the specific outcomes encouraged by these formal theories?
- What student populations are represented (or not) by the research on which these theories are based?

**Institutional context.** Though a part of many assessment models, Stage (1994) and Stage and Dannell's (2000) case study approach are perhaps the only theory-to-practice models that incorporate institutional context explicitly into the process. Following the lead of these authors, we define institutional context more broadly than traditional markers of institutional type, size, or selectivity. While these markers certainly provide some understanding of the institutional context, in this model, institutional context is best understood as an aggregated understanding of informal theories. As suggested by Argyris and Schön (1974), the effort to conceptualize the institution's theory-in-use begins with an analysis of the values, beliefs, and perceptions held by members of the institutional community. Phrased in this way, it has much in common with the "invisible tapestry" of culture suggested by Kuh and Whitt (1988). It also accords nicely with the recent resurgence of developmental theories that recognize the critical influence of context on student growth.

In our model, institutional context is designed to call specific attention to the way in which environment informs institutionally supported student development goals and provide guidance to student affairs professionals about how these goals are best achieved. Although these goals and this guidance may be explicitly articulated through shared readings, planning processes, or professional development activities, it seems more likely that much of it remains implicit and is shared through institutional culture and values (Hirt, 2006; Manning, Kinzie, & Schuh, 2006). Whether

explicit or implicit, institutional context mediates practitioners' understanding and implementation of their own informal theories. As such, institutional context should play a significant role in mediating between formal theory and informal theory.

At this stage in the model, practitioners should consider the following questions:

- What are the sociodemographic characteristics of the students at their institution?
- How do the institution and its students influence the goals practitioners have for education?
- What are the educational values and beliefs held by staff members within student affairs?
- How do these shared (or conflicting) values and beliefs influence practitioners' interactions with students?

**Informal theory.** Formal theories, translated through institutional context and informed by professional practice, give rise to the informal theories that student affairs practitioners use in their everyday practice. Recall, Parker (1977) defined informal theories as "the body of common knowledge that allows us to make implicit connections among the events and persons in our environment and upon which we act in everyday life" (p. 420). Although Parker posited that all professionals have such theories, and they may not even be aware of them, he suggested that informal theories are informed by formal theories, which makes them different than Bensimon's (2007) implicit theories. Bensimon credited the development of practitioners' implicit theories to "time and . . . a variety of experiences" (p. 446), but does not draw an explicit connection between formal theories and informal theories. This connection is essential for informed practice in student affairs. We further suggest that the critical step involved in this stage of the theory-to-practice conversion is the effort to render implicit theories, which are uncritically developed and accepted, into fully contextualized informal theories. Once this conversion is made, informal theories serve as a capable guide to the implementation of appropriate developmental interventions on a given campus by a given student affairs practitioner. Thus, our model suggests that informal theory is produced based upon the confluence of formal theories, institutional context, and the individual student affairs practitioner's positionality. Unlike previous models, however, aligning the theory-to-practice translation in this way suggests the ideal, logical progression between these three layers.

At this point in the model, practitioners may consider the following questions:

- How do I believe learning and development occur during higher education? Or, in Parker's (1977) terms, what is my informal theory of student learning and development?
- How is my informal theory influenced by my own educational experiences and the institution at which I work?
- How does my understanding of formal theory influence my understanding of learning and development?

**Practice.** Practice in this model is succinctly defined as the application of informal theory to the student affairs professionals' work with individual students and student groups. Practice thus requires "concrete and specific behaviors in complex situations" (Parker, 1977, p. 419). Our definition of practice is grounded in the reasoning behind the CAS guidelines for graduate education and the arguments of previous authors who agreed that the best practice flows from an in-depth education in formal theories of student development (e.g., Bensimon, 2007; Rodgers & Widick, 1980). However, our model, like Parker's (1977), suggests that practice is guided by individual practitioner's informal theories of how students act. Practice, then, is the point at which formal and informal theories are translated into specific, concrete behavior with students. Practice thus emerges from the unique nexus between formal theory, institutional context, student affairs practitioners, and individual students with due sensitivity given to the inherent translational issues incumbent to each.

Practitioners should consider the following points:

- How does my work with students relate to my informal theories, the institutional context, and my education in formal student development theories?
- What experiences have I had with students that have been effective/ineffective in generating the kind of learning and development I value?

**Feedback loop (practice to informal theory).** Although the student affairs profession has, arguably, been at the forefront of the outcomes assessment movement in higher education for some time (Schuh & Upcraft, 2001), previous theory-to-practice models have ignored the important process of assessing practice to inform theory. Stage's (1994) and Stage and Dannell's (2000) case study approaches, which were meant to be reactive exercises to practice the application of theory to practice, serve as the exceptions to this statement. Our model thus follows their lead in extending a presently employed best practice (i.e., assessment) to the theory-to-practice conversion.

It seems likely that some assessment occurs naturally within student affairs practice, but we argue this process should be formalized and expanded beyond the traditional focus on programmatic evaluation. Practitioners' reactions, informal and formal assessments, and student feedback reinforce or change practitioners' understanding of the informal theories with which they work. Ultimately, as informal theories change so too will student affairs practice. We argue that these mental frameworks too are appropriate and vital foci for assessment. In so doing, we draw upon Schön's (1987) work related to *reflective practitioners* to argue that student affairs professionals must think about each interaction with students as an opportunity to learn and further enhance their understanding of the informal theories that inform their practice. Schön calls this learning-in-action and posits that it is an essential professional skill.

The focus at this stage of the model is on practitioner reflection on effective practice. Practitioners should consider these questions:

- What particular interventions (or types of interventions) do I return to frequently in my work with students?
- What connections do I make between these interventions and my informal theories?
- What evidence do I have that makes me believe these interventions are effective practices?

**Feedback loop (practice to institutional context).** As described above, the feedback loop connecting practice to informal theory may be, if systematized, a relatively novel contribution to student affairs practice. Our second feedback loop, however, should not be unfamiliar to any student affairs practitioner. Focused on the dual questions of whether programs or developmental interventions perform according to the goals for them and whether those goals are still appropriate given the institutional context, the practice to institutional context feedback loop is simply good assessment practice in student affairs.

Taken a step further, however, this feedback loop can begin to inform the institutional context, as defined above. Focusing questions of effectiveness on shared values, beliefs, and perceptions about the goals of higher education lead to the following set of items for consideration:

- What evidence do we have to indicate that our interventions help students achieve our goals for them?
- How does this evidence support (or refute) our shared beliefs about important goals for students?

## Practical and Scholarly Applications

Our revised model of theory to practice has multiple implications and applications for both practice and scholarship in student affairs. As with most theory-to-practice models, it serves primarily as a guide for practitioners as they undertake this important process. It also calls for increased attention to a formal, practical assessment process akin to Schön's (1987) call for reflection-on-action, elevating the importance of the knowledge generated by practitioners to the point at which researchers/theorists must take heed. The ultimate implication of this model might be a call for scholarly outlets for practitioner knowledge about the theory-to-practice conversion. Such works have the potential both to suggest new avenues for practice and to contribute to reflective practice.

## **The Model as a Guide**

A model such as the one proposed should cause professionals to think explicitly about the content (the boxes) and processes (the arrows) it purports to explain (Evans et al., 1998). The application of our proposed model to the daily work of student affairs professionals should raise the awareness of practitioners to the effects of formal theory, institutional context, and informal theories on their practice. Student affairs practitioners should be trained, within graduate school and through ongoing professional development opportunities, to engage in reflective practice (Schön, 1987), making explicit the knowledge and assumptions that guide their work.

## **Encourage Reflective Practice, Reflection-in-Action, and Reflection-on-Action**

As suggested by our model, a reflexive practitioner should be able to describe the formal theories, understanding of institutional context, understanding of theory-in-context or informal theory, and the goals of programs and developmental interventions that guide their action. Ideally, the connections between these content areas should be made explicit during the theory-to-practice process, becoming subject to reflection and revision. As we argued above, this reflective process is fostered by the introduction of two feedback loops. The first asks: how is my perception of practice outcomes incorporated into the informal theories that I employ? The second asks: how does practice inform the way in which I understand institutional context relative to formal theories and localized understandings of student development? Such an articulation of reflective practice is consistent with Schön (1987). Time for critical reflection on professional practice must be incorporated into the daily action of student affairs professionals (reflection-in-action), should be included as part of professional staff meetings (reflection-on-action), and must be nurtured and developed within professional preparation programs. The questions that arise at each step of our model, as presented in this paper, can be used to guide this reflective process.

## **The Methods of Theory to Practice**

A successful theory-to-practice translation requires the rigorous application of formal theory as modified by local context. Consequently, we suggest that one of the clearest implications of our theory-to-practice model is a need for scholarly treatments of the theory-to-practice conversions. Only by applying the formalized scholarly techniques to a local context and by sharing these results broadly can we normalize reflexive practice. Given the highly individual nature of this endeavor, we follow Stage and Dannells's (2000) suggestion that the case study is an appropriate basis for the scholarship of student affairs practice. We further suggest that the attention to institutional culture provided by Magolda's (1999) use of ethnographic techniques in students affairs research makes it an ideal way to focus on the process connecting institutional context to informal theory, while Reason's (2001) description of narrative research as a means of capturing a story makes it uniquely well suited to the highly interpersonal nature of the informal theory-to-practice connec-

tion. Taken together, these techniques represent a powerful analytical framework that makes the case studies proposed by Stage and Dannells (2000) an approach suitable both for practical action and scholarly dissemination. We, thus, suggest the need for more venues for the dissemination of this sort of work at the institutional level as well as within the scholarly community. Such an argument brings us back to the origins of the field as one dominated by scholar-practitioners.

## Conclusion

In this paper, we have suggested a model designed to guide theory-to-practice translations. Although this model was developed concurrently with the arguments put forth by Love (2012) and Evans and Guido (2012), this model anticipated both arguments and is simultaneously rigorous and adaptive. Based upon its insistence on student affairs practice guided by formal theories developed in accordance with the highest scholarly standards as well as the use of systematized feedback mechanisms, the model incorporates the rigor that is the hallmark of process models such as Rodgers and Widick (1980) and Evans (1987). Simultaneously, however, our model suggests that any theory-to-practice translation should be run through the lens of local institutional context before the creation of an informal theory of student development. As a result, our model incorporates the best elements of the guiding construct approach to theory use that has dominated recent scholarly literature. It is thus highly adaptive as well.

To make this argument, we have reviewed existing models of theory to practice and suggested the key elements and conditions for a successful model. Based on this analysis, we proposed a model consisting of four steps (or content areas): formal theory, institutional context, informal theory, and practice. Furthermore, we have introduced two feedback loops consistent with the growing emphasis on assessment in student learning and development. These feedback loops afford student affairs practitioners the opportunity to engage in reflective practice and ensure that the conversion from rigorous formal theory to the adaptive needs of practice (driven by informal theory) does not result in undesirable outcomes. Such an argument responds to the long-running tension between scholarship and practice in student affairs as documented both by Parker (1977) and Bensimon (2007) while suggesting a hopeful direction forward. With greater attention to the theory-to-practice conversion in institutional contexts, we are in a better position to achieve our goals for students. At the same time, greater attention to the issue in scholarly circles serves to raise consciousness around the critical issue of reflexive practice.

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