

Utilizing Self-Authorship to Understand the College Admission Process



KELLEYWALCZAK is a doctoral student at the University of Michigan and a graduate of Marquette University (WI) and Loyola University Chicago (IL). She is a research assistant for the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education. Prior to her doctoral studies, she worked in TRIO programs with low-income, first-generation college students.

Adolescence is a time of change, transition and development. Students gain new knowledge, experiences and insights, and struggle to make sense of all the new information they accumulate. The self-authorship theory explains how students make meaning out of their worlds as they travel through adolescence. Not surprisingly, the college experience is believed to promote a more complex way of viewing the world; however, it is difficult to examine how college encourages the development of self-authorship without first looking at how students make sense of entry into college through the admission process. Guidance counselors and admission officers helping students through this development and transition may find it helpful to examine the college admission process through the lenses of Kegan's Orders of Consciousness and Baxter Magolda's Journey Toward Self-Authorship, concentrating on the orders that apply to traditional-aged college students and the college environment.

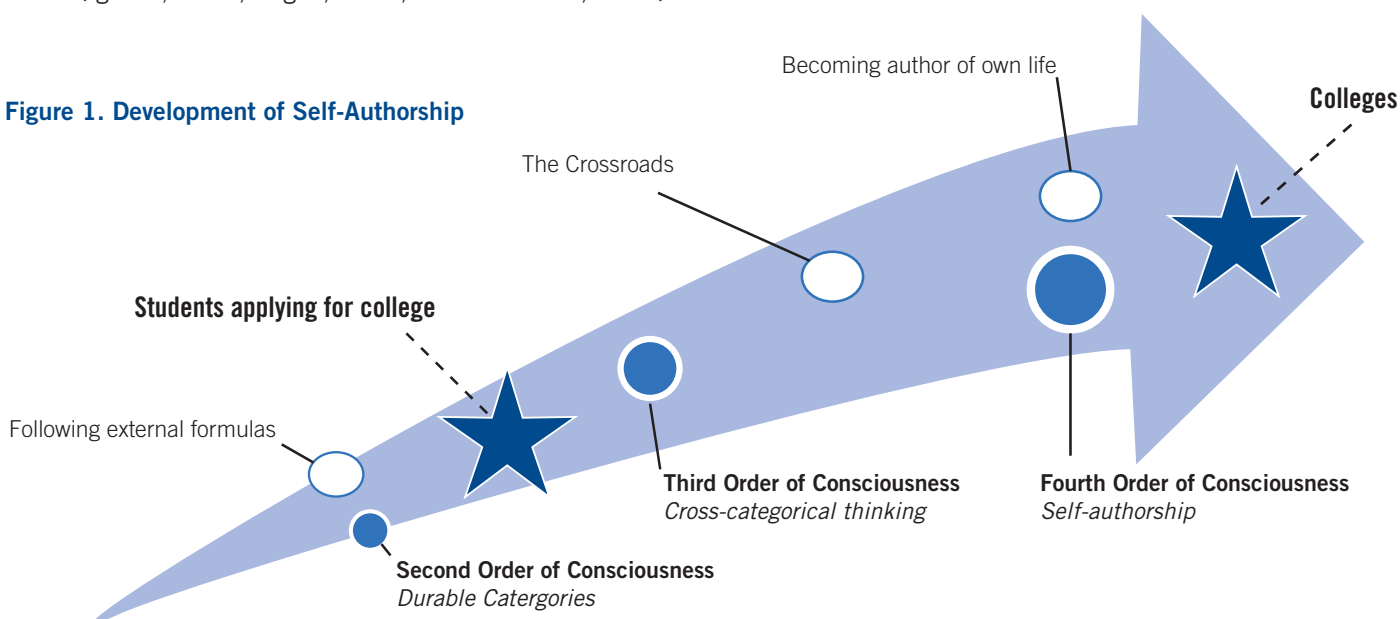
Theory of Self-Authorship

Robert Kegan and Marcia Baxter Magolda are researchers/authors who have developed and contributed greatly to the theory of self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2004, 2005a, 2005b; Kegan, 1994, 2005) and whose work has been frequently cited in the discussion of self-authorship (Ignelzi, 2005; Laughlin & Creamer, 2007; Love & Guthrie, 2005; Pizzolato, 2003, 2007). The theory is rooted in the belief that people are constantly evolving and that this evolution includes a constantly changing way of organizing thoughts, feelings and relationships along the epistemological (cognitive), intrapersonal (understanding of self) and interpersonal dimensions (relationships with others). The process is known as "meaning making," which Kegan dissects into Orders of Consciousness, numbered from zero to five (Ignelzi, 2005; Kegan, 1994; Love & Guthrie, 2005).

Specifically, the development of meaning occurs through the balancing and rebalancing of subject and object.

Love and Guthrie (2005) identify the transition between Kegan's second and third order as occurring between 12–20 years of age, which suggests that some students are making this transition during the college decision-making process and/or when they enter college. Ignelzi (2005) and Kegan (2004) report most traditional-aged college students are either in the third order of consciousness or transitioning from the third to the fourth orders of consciousness at the beginning of college. Kegan (2004) believes that most college faculty assume students operate from the fourth order of consciousness or from a level of self-authored meaning making, even though Ignelzi (2005) reports that more than half of the adult population has not fully reached this level.

Figure 1. Development of Self-Authorship



The Second Order

The hallmark of the second order is the creation of durable categories, which are classifications of objects, people or ideas that are separate from the self and that have their own characteristics (Kegan, 2005; Love & Guthrie, 2005). Students in this order often identify themselves by these categories and characteristics. Baxter Magolda (2004) calls this phase following external formulas because students borrow their way of knowing themselves and the world from external sources. Students are able to see that others may hold a different perspective, but are primarily concerned with their own needs, own points of view, and gaining others' approval.

The Third Order

The third order of consciousness involves cross-categorical thinking, including the ability to think abstractly, construct ideals and put others' interests ahead of the person's own interests (Kegan, 2005; Love & Guthrie, 2005). In addition, individuals can construct their own viewpoints, but do not understand how others' opinions influence their own ideas and views (Ignelzi, 2005; Kegan, 2005). The sense of self is reliant on others and the individual cannot express a viewpoint without implicating the external forces that influenced the viewpoint. Baxter Magolda (2004) refers to the third order, and more specifically the transition from the third order to the fourth order of consciousness as the crossroads, which is marked by a dissatisfaction with the external formulas and the beginning of a search inward as the way of knowing.

Fourth Order

The fourth order of consciousness is reached when values and ideas move from subject to object, which is known as self-authorship. This order includes the ability to make cross-categorical constructions, the ability to integrate and act on the ideas, beliefs and generalizations they have constructed and to develop convictions about the values they hold (Love & Guthrie, 2005). In addition, this order is different than the third order because the relationship of the individual to others is considered, but the individual is still differentiated from the others (Ignelzi, 2005). Only one-third to one-half of adults fully reaches the fourth order.

Baxter Magolda (2004) differs from Kegan by recognizing two distinct phases of self-authorship, beginning with becoming the author of one's own life and moving toward internal foundation, which does not occur until after age 30. According to Magolda (2000), the process of

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becoming self-authored involves intense self-reflection so that they are able to articulate "how I know" rather than how everyone else knows. Individuals are able to develop mutual, equal relationships with others, considering not only the other person's needs but their own needs as well.

The Application of Self-Authorship in College Admission

In order to understand how guidance counselors and admission counselors can support students through the college admission process, they must first understand how students make meaning as they move through the process. Before applying self-authorship to the college admission process, it is important to emphasize one constraint—meaning-making does not reflect intellectual ability or potential (Ignelzi, 2005). It is developmental and evolves over time. The process reflects the way an individual organizes experiences only. For example, if a student demonstrates difficulty looking at an issue from multiple perspectives, this difficulty should not be interpreted as an inability to evaluate arguments, but as a developmental challenge the student needs to learn and overcome. Therefore, when a student reveals his/her meaning making structure in the college admission process, the structure should not be used as another method of evaluation for college preparedness, but as a way to support and respond to the student in a developmentally appropriate way.

Students transitioning between the second and third order approach the college admission process reliant on external formulas. They may identify themselves by their durable categories, such as "I like soccer" or "I like math." These categories are stable ("For as long as I can remember, I have wanted to be a doctor"). Many students in this order have not questioned the decision to attend college

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because it is what they have been told they should do after high school. These students have developed beliefs about college from those who they believe are authorities on college, such as parents or guidance counselors, and can be heavily influenced in their decisions based on approval from these authorities. They may also rely on rankings or reputation to determine a university's value and may not trust their own instincts or "gut feelings." In addition, these students want to understand the exact formula for gaining admission to college (e.g. how many AP classes they should take, what GPA and SAT scores they need). These students might respond to the question, "Why do you want to attend ABC University?" by matching their own durable categories to perceived benefits of the university. Students might highlight offerings/assets of the institution that they find personally helpful or interesting. For example, "I have always wanted to be a doctor and I know ABC University has a strong pre-med program and high medical school acceptance rate." These students rely heavily on others to help them decide which school to attend (Laughlin & Creamer, 2007), maybe even deferring the decision-making to friends ("I'm going to go where my best friend is going.") or family ("My father thinks Local College is the best choice."). They might look for an external confirmation, such as a scholarship or generous financial aid package, that their college choices are "correct."

Students in the third order or transitioning from third to fourth order approach the college admission process as the potential to join a new community. With the development of cross-categorical thinking, students no longer identify solely with durable categories, but think about what categories mean. For example, students might reflect on what it means to be a doctor or a soccer player. In addition, students consider authorities' opinions, but also recognize their own opinions to develop a distinct point of view (Laughlin & Creamer, 2007). Students recognize that each institution has positive and negative attributes, and are aware that their perceptions of these "attributes" often come from external sources. For example, a student might be interested in hearing class lectures from a leading scholar at a large research institution, but would be more comfortable in a smaller classroom at a liberal arts college. A student at the crossroads might answer the question "Why do you want to attend ABC University?" by highlighting those aspects of the university the student finds personally helpful, but also citing some ways in which the student expects to contribute to the campus or larger community. These students are more aware and more confident of their own instincts in the decision-making process. They can articulate how they reach their decisions, but the rationale will still be linked with information gained from external sources.

Implications for Practice

As Ignelzi says, "Supporting someone's development first requires comprehending and valuing how the other person currently understands his or her experience" (Ignelzi, 2005, p. 660). Because most colleges and universities operate from a higher level than the students they are admitting (Kegan 2004), guidance and admission counselors need to be aware of these gaps and act as "sympathetic coaches" who support students during the bridge-building between where the student is and where the college wants him or her to be (Love & Guthrie, 2005).

Citing that exposing students to new ways of thinking is not sufficient for stimulating development of self-authorship (Ignelzi, 2005; Kegan, 1994; Laughlin & Creamer, 2007), Ignelzi (2005) offers four suggestions to help students become self-authored. First, understand and appreciate students' meaning-making structures. Understanding how students are making sense of the world leads to better support. Students construct meaning from external sources, counselors included. They seek feedback and validation; however, professionals must also be aware of their own meaning-making structures. For example, counselors might

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seek approval and feedback from students. Confirming that counselors' advice is helpful, they become overly eager to give opinions, thus creating a loop of following external formulas. This does not challenge students to develop.

The second suggestion (which breaks the external loop) is to provide opportunities for students to experiment with more advanced ways of meaning making in a non-threatening environment. As students begin the college search, guidance counselors can provide an opportunity for reflection and the tools for students to uncover the reasons for the focus of their college search or decision-making. For example, to encourage students to identify what is personally important, guidance counselors can ask, "What college characteristics are most important in your college choice?" If these characteristics follow with external formulas, the guidance counselor helps students uncover these by asking, "Why is that important to you?" or "What is most appealing about Local College?" or "How did you come to that decision?"

Admission offices can also provide opportunities for students to test higher orders of consciousness and alleviate some pressure on students by emphasizing there is not one "right" way to gain admission. By offering students general guidelines and encouraging a holistic review of the student's application, the student is forced to reflect more on his or her attributes rather than focus on those the admission counselor designates as important. Essays encourage students to reflect and respond about why they want to attend a particular college and/or what they hope to contribute as a member of the campus community (which in turn establishes recognition of the communal aspects of campus life).

Third, Ignelzi (2005) encourages students to work together as they transition from order to order. Guidance counselors could offer opportunities for reflection in small groups, while admission offices can offer freshman mentors and advisors to help potential students navigate the admission process. This group work allows students to

distinguish their own viewpoints from others' viewpoints, which is necessary in the development of self-authorship.

Finally, Ignelzi (2005) recommends feedback and celebration of the journey toward self-authorship. Students may feel apprehensive or conflicted about asserting their own voices—reinforcing and supporting students when they do helps them gain confidence and become more assertive.

Kegan's Orders of Consciousness and Baxter Magolda's Journey Toward Self-Authorship provide a helpful framework for understanding how students approach the college admission process. Guidance counselors and admission counselors should be the bridge between student and university—not the gatekeepers. They can facilitate the developmental transition between where the student is and where the college expects the student to be for educational success. They also support the development of self-authorship by providing a safe space for students to reflect upon their expectations of college, thus laying the foundation for the transition from one phase of knowing to the next.

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