

THE COUNSELOR AND THE NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENT

BY

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A MASTER'S REPORT

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requirements for the degree

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Higher education is expanding to include a greater portion of the population and, in so doing, is seeking and finding new ways to provide learning experiences to the non-traditional student. Counselors, then, are being confronted with the challenge to serve these students; often, without training concerning unique characteristics of non-traditional students and the underlying developmental stages of adults. Considering these great differences, in contrast to the traditional student, the counselor must be able to adjust and utilize new counseling techniques.

### STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Only through exposure to non-traditional students and through the use of trial and error techniques has the counselor been able to:

(1) define common characteristics, (2) recognize underlying developmental stages and (3) realize the most effective techniques for counseling non-traditional students. The need for a general discussion of these three points seemed paramount as an orientation for counselors considering or currently functioning in a position relating to non-traditional students.

### DEFINITION OF TERMS

Non-Traditional Student. An adult learner with a barrier to traditional higher educational opportunities seeking college credits through non-conventional means.

Independent Study. "Study containing motivation, curiosity, a sense of self-sufficiency and self-direction, ability to think critically and creatively, awareness of resources, and some ability to use them," Dressel and Thompson (1973).

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Arthur Chickering's theory on developmental stages of adults (Chickering, 1975) provides the basis for understanding the unique and varying needs of the adult learner. As the adult progresses through Chickering's developmental stages, life takes on new meaning, goals are altered, family relationships change, self-concept evolves and, thus, educational emphasis fluctuates.

The application of developmental stages to a particular population has been accomplished by Harold L. Hodgkinson (1975) when he related the stages to college faculty and administrators. Hodgkinson examines the implications of each stage as it influences the development of the typical college faculty member or administrator. Through Hodgkinson's discussion, one can better understand the application of developmental theory to real-life situations.

Non-traditional students can usually be described and categorized in a manner similar to that done by Cross, Valley and Associates (1974). These authors have described the non-traditional student as having the following characteristics: 54% female, average age of 44, 88% Caucasian, 78% married, and 42% have had some postsecondary education.

At the Second National Conference on Open Learning and Non-Traditional Study, Harold Hodgkinson (1975) added that non-traditional learners are typically middle class white-collar workers employed full-time making \$12-15,000/year. Hodgkinson described the population as a basis for developing non-traditional programs.

Educational Testing Service's Findings (1974, Number 3) reported that although students may ask for independent study, the Open University finds two-thirds to three-fourths of their students visiting learning centers at least once a week for 2 to 4 hours. This time for interaction is seen as vital to the learning experience be it for learning interaction or simply an atmosphere conducive to learning.



## CHAPTER III

### CHARACTERISTICS OF NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS

The counselor who attempts to serve non-traditional students must be aware of the characteristics common to this group of learners. The characteristics of these students may be categorized as either statistical or personal/psychological in nature.

The statistical characteristics of non-traditional students can be found in Cross, Valley and Associates (1974) where they describe non-traditional students as having the following characteristics: 54% are female, average age is 44, 88% are Caucasian, 78% are married and 42% have had some previous postsecondary education. Statistics on Kansas State University non-traditional students follow closely with 66% female, average age of 43, age range of 21-67 and a majority are Caucasian, married and have had some postsecondary education. Hodgkinson (1975) added that most non-traditional students are middle class people earning \$12-15,000 annually.

The personal/psychological characteristics of non-traditional students include personal concerns toward self-actualization, learning style and management considerations.

Many non-traditional students have changing interests and goals, a new concern for one's own growth and some internal roadblocks which must be understood by the counselor before learning progress and success may occur. Many non-traditional students find that their interests have changed as they have matured and gained practical experience in living and working. These changing interests usually necessitate new goals and renewed education to attain these goals. Since the student

has already had the practical experience, education will usually focus on the theoretical aspect. This is exactly opposite of what the traditional student first obtains, since the traditional student first obtains the theoretical basis in school and is then sent into the working world to obtain some practical experience. The non-traditional student, already exposed to the practical aspect, therefore, usually has more stable and well-defined career goals and, thus, a greater motivation to attain these goals. Although some non-traditional students will waiver between curricula, most will know where they are and where they're headed with little help from the counselor.

Many non-traditional students, especially the women, are seeking the personal growth formerly unavailable to them because of marriage or family responsibilities. The women's liberation movement has given impetus to this desire as has society's emphasis on independence. Both encourage personal growth and place emphasis on one's self, which leads to more people of all ages becoming concerned about personal growth and enrichment.

Another personal concern among non-traditional students is their own internal roadblocks, specifically, their (1) perception of the counselor, (2) perception of college professors, (3) self-concept. Before the counselor can progress with non-traditional students, a positive rapport must be established. (See: Techniques, Chapter 5). This aspect is magnified since the counselor is working with an adult student who may have a fear or uneasiness in regard to talking with a "counselor." It appears that the older the student, the greater the uneasiness. Therefore, the counselor must be aware of this possibility from the beginning and watch for it throughout the counseling experience. There,

also, seems to be a direct relationship between uneasiness and the lack of prior college attendance. We can probably contribute both of these observations to an older person's connotation of a "counselor" as being somewhat of a threat to one's ability to progress on one's own. So, it becomes vital that the counselor establish a positive relationship by demonstrating genuine concern and non-threatening aid to the non-traditional learner.

Another concept which initiates uneasiness in direct proportion to the age of the student is personal contact with a college professor. Again, the older the student the greater the preconceived notion that college professors are almost nonhuman which is, also, relative to prior contact with professors. In the past the public held professors in great esteem, as is demonstrated by studies in occupational ranking as to prestige. The college professor has fallen consistently over the last few years which may indicate that as the past snobbery and intellectualism labels are disputed a more human figure is created which, in turn, becomes more easy to communicate with on the student to professor level. Therefore, older students, in particular, must be shown that professors do not see themselves as superior to the student and are interested in them on a one-to-one basis. (See: Techniques, Chapter 5).

Another most common personal concern is the student's own self-concept. Some students feel uncomfortable with the counselor, the professors, the other student and their studies only because they are uncomfortable with themselves. Their desire has won the initial battle by making contact with a Non-Traditional Study Program but from that point on they must understand their own feelings about themselves

before progress can be made. The counselor will probably have to help them over each hurdle as it appears. The students sometime feel uncomfortable about their abilities after an absence from formal classroom learning and because they are part of the minority in regard to what most people are doing at their age. The counselor must help build and maintain a student's self-concept and be sensitive to the individual's needs. As the self-concept improves, progress and success will follow. Thus, the student has learned the academics and the route to success.

The adult learner who is considering entering or re-entering the college classroom after some absence from the formal learning experience often feels insecure about making such a move. Perhaps this insecurity arises from the thought of competing with younger students who have had more recent relevant background experiences in traditional classroom success, thus creating a feeling of competition with probable failure. A number of students have confided such a fear, but once put into the classroom, they have found their desire far outweighs the younger students' recent experiences. Perhaps, the adult learner's life experiences have helped to balance this scale and the counselor should stress this aspect.

The older non-traditional student has often learned a great deal through practical experience and is seeking the theoretical aspects of the field. The non-traditional student with a broader work and social background then has more experiences upon which to draw for some in-depth independent study. There will be some area in which the student has developed an interest to begin narrowing for an independent study project.

Students are seeking non-traditional study but not necessarily

totally independent study. A study of the Open University, the results of which were published in Educational Testing Service's Findings (1974, Number 3) shows that only three percent of the adults surveyed indicated a preference for the correspondence course as an instructional method, and only seven percent indicated that studying on their own was desirable. On the other hand, twenty-eight percent reported that they preferred learning through lectures and classes. This may lead one to believe that they really want traditional education. However, the counselor must understand that although they may prefer that type of learning, circumstances probably are preventing it, so the counselor must help them discover a learning method most closely assimilating classroom methods and contacts, yet providing the desired flexibility and personal interaction. The same Open University study showed that the desire for personal interaction with other students and instructors was strong enough to cause "between two-thirds and three-fourths of the adult learners to visit the Open University study center about once a week for 2-4 hours a visit." Therefore, the counselor must be careful not to interpret a student's desire for non-traditional study as being synonymous with a desire for strictly independent study. However, independent study will be important to a non-traditional program. In such a case, the counselor must be prepared to help the student develop the ability for beneficial and meaningful independent study. Paul Dressel and Mary Thompson (1973) define the term "independent study" as containing motivation, curiosity, a sense of self-sufficiency and self-direction, ability to think critically and creatively, awareness of resources, and some ability to use them." Once the counselor understands such a definition he/she will become the catalyst for the implementation of such within

each student. By being aware and understanding the common characteristics of non-traditional students the counselor can best facilitate the necessary self-examination needed by the non-traditional student to be successful with independent study.

Non-traditional adult learners differ from typical students in that more have personal obligations which, more often than not, carry priority over their educational goals at any given time. Being, generally, older established people, non-traditional students may have family, financial and other personal obligations less common among younger traditional college students. These obligations often force the student into certain educational choices which they otherwise may not have made. These choices, therefore, are not always indicative of a students' interests or goals. The counselor must understand which personal obligations rank above the student's educational goals and work with the student in finding the most acceptable manner in which to fulfill the requirements of both most adequately. Therefore, the counselor must, again, establish a good rapport with the student, and not attempt to unduly reorganize the student's priorities. At various times during the educational process the student may need help in re-organizing priorities, especially, in the beginning and near completion of short term goals or near graduation. These are times when the emphasis on education normally changes, thus initiating at least a thought of priority reorganization. For that matter, the educational pursuit may be stimulated by current or future personal obligations, as would be the case as the family structure changes and financial obligations increase or future career interests are explored as the family responsibility disappates.

An example of both time availability and changing priorities would

be a lady who is currently working through independent study to complete her social science degree. She is a minister's wife who wanted to prepare for a career separate from her husband's and sought a degree toward that end. She spent much of her time with independent study and was moving quite rapidly when a job opportunity presented itself and she accepted. The work is what she had hoped to do and did not require a degree. With the work came fewer study hours, causing a new study schedule and a slower pace. However, she is continuing her studies as a lower priority item. Many students will have simple and apparent reorganizational needs while others will have hidden, struggling, complex and frequent needs for reorganization of priorities and time. No two students will rank their priorities in the same order nor allow the same amount of time for studying no matter how similar their situations seem. Therefore, the counselor has to work with each individual and consider all points when advising students of time, faculty and university requirements.

All of the preceding characteristics of non-traditional students are important to the counselor. However, the counselor must remember that no two students are going to have identical characteristics. Each will combine a number of characteristics to become a unique and challenging individual. The counselor who believes this will best serve the individual student and will be successful in a Non-Traditional Program.

## CHAPTER IV

### DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES - IMPLICATIONS FOR NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS

By juxtaposing developmental ages (Appendix 1) with theorists' life cycles (Appendix 2) one can better understand developmental stages. Each stage carries significant implications of non-traditional students to the benefit of the counselor when fully understood.

#### LEAVING THE FAMILY (18-24)

During this stage the student may still be part of the parental family through living location or personal close attachment or dependence. This period provides for trying out of some adult roles without too much risk. Those non-traditional students in this stage will most likely reflect the instability and adventure of this stage. Exploring independence through financial stability and educational pursuits will be important to this learner who will, thus, give finances (job) priority. Goals are probably not as stable as older students, since there has been less practical experience.

#### GETTING INTO THE ADULT WORLD (22-29)

This stage represents complete adult role-playing -- family, parenting, world of work. The student strives to fulfill earlier perceptions of adult roles and works toward being successful in them. The non-traditional student in this stage is often seeking job advancement. The female may be searching for more meaning in her life, but still gives priorities to the family situation. This student, also, will probably desire structured learning options.



## TRANSITIONAL (28-33)

Having fulfilled the perceived adult roles, students in this group begin to reassess their position and their future. Do they want to continue doing this or is there something more fulfilling to pursue? Family dedication may lessen, however, probably still carries priority. If a major change of direction is to occur, it most likely will happen now. Students will be seeking skills to progress in an already chosen field or will be exploring new areas of interest. Study will begin to become more need oriented and less structured.

## SETTLING DOWN (30-40)

Choices made during the transitional stage will manifest themselves now. The person will settle into a chosen pattern of work for the future and seek advancement toward a goal. The student will be working to better prepare for promotions and will be more self-confident. The student will begin to face the realities of the situation and may need to redefine long range goals. The woman will have fewer family demands and probably be preparing for a career after the family. Priorities will be with the family, but self-growth gains in importance.

## MID-LIFE TRANSITION (38-40)

The past is reflected and the future explored. Family is dispersing and self-growth is flourishing. Death is still an abstraction, yet age dictates a last opportunity for change. Students of both sexes may be seeking new directions. Goals will be realistic and stable. Motivation will be high as will performance. Self-growth is most important and life invaluable. Independent Study to meet particular needs is almost mandatory.

## RESTABLIZATION AND FLOWERING (43-50)

The person is at peace with most decisions and working on self-actualizing. Narrower interests are pursued yet the person flowers. Students are seeking information for interest. Last chance for college and use of degree. Probably more concerned with just learning to be learning. Independent Study interesting, yet, maybe threatening. No earlier exposure may cause insecurity at this age in attempting formal education. Encouragement usually necessary. Spouse is important.

## LIFE AFTER 50

One's preoccupation is with self and the time remaining to self-actualize. Spouse is increasingly important and social circle decreases and interests narrow. What one has done for reflection is important. Any students are present only for interest or personal satisfaction. Financial or employment benefits of education are impossible. Structure in coursework is regained as self-confidence is lost if without prior educational experience. Education has low priority.

Arthur Chickering's (1975) combination and comparison of adult developmental age theories can be very helpful in understanding underlying stimuli. However, the counselor can be misled by either surface reasons for an adult's motivation for change in the life pattern or by total reliance on the knowledge of usual developmental stages. Only by having an awareness of both can the counselor better understand the motivations of the adult student. Combine this knowledge with Chickering's juxtaposition of developmental age and life cycle theories (Appendix 2) and the counselor has an invaluable base for better understanding the adult learner.

## CHAPTER V

### COUNSELING TECHNIQUES FOR NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS

#### ESTABLISHING RAPPORT

It is vital that the counselor establish a positive rapport by demonstrating genuine concern and non-threatening aid to the non-traditional learner. An effective way of establishing rapport is through basic background conversation. Ask questions about the student's background interests, and family, pick up on what is said as a basis for interjecting a similar personal experience, yet being careful not to overdo this, since the student is not here to hear the counselor's experiences. This seems to establish a bond and confidence in the counselor's ability to relate to the student's situation, which in turn initiates more open and honest responses by the student. For example, one student was experiencing a number of family problems which were effecting her established need for personal growth. She mentioned a concern for her daughter's ability to continue to cope with a young child while trying to attend college. When there was a break in the conversation, the counselor mentioned that she could very easily relate to her daughter's situation since she, too, had been in that situation. This simple statement established common ground for the relationship immediately and she began to relate her feelings stemming from this concern to all of her many other family problems which, until then, she had tried to cover up. By knowing her complete family background, the counselor could then derive a more accurate picture of why she was seeking non-traditional study and how she may be able to help her. It is really

exciting to see that such a simple statement could go so far in establishing rapport. In another instance a counselor simply commented that he had visited an area where the student had once lived. It seemed to provide common ground upon which to build a more trusting and comfortable atmosphere which in turn provided the necessary rapport for successful counseling sessions. Once such a rapport is established the counselor must constantly remember the client's possible reservations about the counseling situation and be sure not to present any threatening aid. (i.e. destroy a positive relationship by saying something that may offend the client or imply that the client cannot handle a situation alone). By maintaining a positive relationship and gaining the trust of the student the counselor will best be able to help the non-traditional student progress more rapidly and successfully.

#### MEETING THE PROFESSOR

To demonstrate that the professor is interested in the student on a one-to-one basis the counselor may want to approach the professor with the student's learning proposal and background alone, first, to see if the professor is able and willing to work with the student. If so, the counselor should then tell the student about the arrangement and emphasize that the professor is willing to work on a one-to-one basis on the project in which the student seeks guidance, thereby, conveying the interest of the professor in the student's work. Some students will need a great deal of encouragement to get them to feel at ease about meeting with a professor while those with positive prior experiences will probably take the initiative with little or no encouragement. It is this feeling of regard by the student that the counselor must identify

in the personal concerns conversation before arranging a student-professor session so as to prevent frightening the student away from the total learning experience by presenting a threatening encounter. For example, one particular student had no previous college experience and being from a small Kansas town had had no contact with college professors. Her respect for professors seemed to turn into idolization and, thus, a perception of inferiority. After the initial contact with an outstanding professor, she revised her concept of all professors and began to gain more self-confidence and pride. She's now ready to meet anyone at anytime. The counselor can say a lot to dispel these misconceptions, but the true convincer is a well chosen professor for the initial contact session. The professor will probably make the difference as to whether the student continues or not.

#### BUILDING SELF-CONCEPT

Once the counselor has considered the student's self-concept, the decision can be made whether to ease the student into a classroom or build confidence through independent study first. For the student with a barrier to classroom attendance this decision is lessened, however, the counselor's perception of abilities should still guide the student's choice of the non-traditional options available (e.g. the student requiring more structure could ease into total independent study by first doing more structured individual study such as television courses or correspondence courses). It is important that the counselor perceive and encourage the best option for the particular student that most likely insures success, since the insecure older student once discouraged is difficult to revive.

## SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING

The counselor needs to first understand if there is a particular course, curricula or competency requirement which the student desires to fulfill by the study and suggest the proper method of meeting the particular requirement. It is often easiest to gradually work the student into pure independent self-directed learning than to force the student into a situation which is not fully understood or comfortable. To do this the counselor might suggest the following procedures which may vary, of course, depending on how quickly the student grasps the concept of independent study and the requirements desired to be fulfilled by the study. The highly structured student will probably be most successful by taking a course description and devising one's own methods of learning what is stated. The second independent study project might then detail a particular area within the first in which the student's interest is deeper. Ideally, the student would then pursue a topic of interest and importance to himself and do so independently and creatively with very little guidance. The student would then be learning what he wanted to learn in the manner in which he wanted to learn it (Self-directed Study). The student becomes the initiator, the researcher, the reporter and the learner. Once the student reaches this point, the counselor's role changes more to one of requirement guidance rather than personal guidance.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

As can be seen throughout this paper, the non-traditional program counselor must be a "jack-of-all-trades." The counselor must be an effective listener, a record keeper, a catalyst, a prodder, an examiner, study skill improver, a time budgeter, a University catalog, a transcript analyst and, most of all, a person. All of this is how the counselor must relate to the student. The counselor must, also, be able to work with faculty in securing course monitors, informing them of the program, teaching them to work with the student's interest as the focus rather than a specific course or their specialty and encouraging the transference of their cooperation to other faculty members.

As higher education reaches out to serve more of the non-traditional students in non-traditional ways, the counselor will become more important to the success and growth of such programs. By being aware of some of the basic underlying characteristics of many such students the counselor will be able to function more effectively and successfully to the benefit of higher education, the institution, the program, one's self, and, most importantly, the student.

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# APPENDIX 1

Theorist      15      20      25      30      35      40      45      50      55      60      65      70

Levinson  
(1974)

leaving the family

settling down

reestablishment

getting into the adult world

boom

transitional period

Mentor plays significant role

mid-life transition

Levinson, R.L.  
(1972)

leaving leaving becoming  
parents parents adult  
breaking staying marriage  
out out work

Question cont. quest.  
life's values; time  
meaning is finite.  
responsible

for parents as well as children

Occupational  
Die is cast  
interest in  
friends,  
reliance on spouse  
mellowing, spouse in-  
creasingly important.  
review of contributions,

reliance on peers

children

Levinson  
(1974)

pulling up  
roots adulthood

age 30  
transi-  
tion

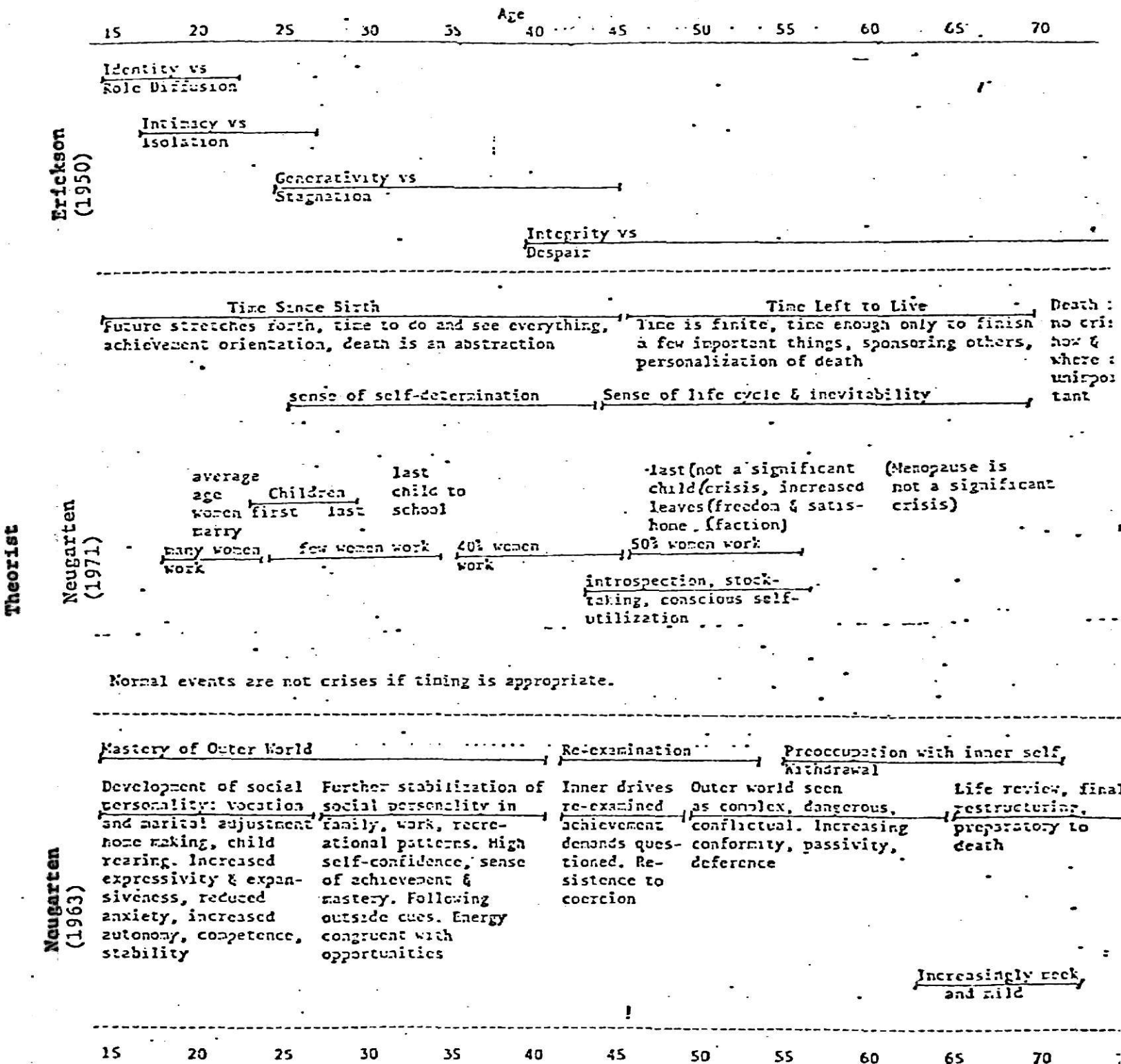
rooting, mid-life  
transition and flowering

boom

15      20      25      30      35      40      45      50      55      60      65      70

## APPENDIX 2

### The Life Cycle



THE COUNSELOR AND THE NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENT

by

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## ABSTRACT

### THE COUNSELOR AND THE NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENT

This paper contains many of the basics applied to counseling in general with some attention paid to different or unique characteristics of Non-Traditional students of which the counselor needs to be aware. It serves to remind the counselor of what to look for and expect when working with non-traditional students.

For the purpose of this paper, Non-Traditional Students are defined as those adult learners with barriers to traditional higher educational opportunities seeking college credits through non-conventional means. Both the statistical and the personal/psychological aspects of the students are examined. The paper attempts to relate each of these to the non-traditional student and explain to the counselor why each is important and how it fits into the total educational picture for the students.

Arthur Chickering's discussion on adult developmental stages is used as a basis for understanding the special needs of adult learners. By combining this with the basic characteristics of non-traditional students the author discusses counseling techniques. This paper may serve as a basic introductory resource for new counselors dealing with non-traditional students or simply as a reminder that each student will combine a variety of characteristics to make him or her a unique individual.