

A Snapshot of College Age Development and What to Expect at WPI

Through their time in college, students can be found asking themselves:

- What are my values?
- How do those values align with my peers, with my academic interests and in the world?
- What do I like?
- How do I balance my life as a young adult?
- How am I doing moving toward independence and autonomy?
- What do I want to study?
- What kind of work do I want to do after college?
- What do healthy relationships look like?
- How am I feeling?
- Who am I?

These questions are common among all emerging adults who are learning about themselves while pursuing an undergraduate degree.



College is a time of great identity development. Students develop cognitively, interpersonally, and intrapersonally. Students start to understand who they are and how they interact within the world through traditional classroom curricula and experiences outside the classroom. Most students who enter college are interacting socially with peers, starting to develop professionalism as they engage with professors and staff, living away from home for the first time, engaging with people of different backgrounds, and having novel experiences that begin shaping them as persons who are starting to grow into young adulthood.

- Developmentally, college-age students continue to grow. Brain development continues well into their 20s, with average brains completing full frontal cortex development at 25 years old.
- Cognitively, college-age students are continuing to develop advanced formal operations, like analyzing their environment to make deductions and evaluating multiple options to solve problems.
- Generally, to achieve a full sense of self or fulfillment, it's important to have essential esteem needs met, such as confidence, achievement, respect for and by others, and other esteem needs noted in Maslow's work.
- Most notably, young people are also going through critical stages of development around personal identity. Chickering and Reisser surmise that each student goes through 7 Vectors of Development while realizing their identity. Understanding the vectors will help parents and caregivers understand the personal growth that students develop through their time in higher education. They pinpoint critical areas of development and how each student begins to create their own unique identity. The 7 Vectors include:
 - Developing competence
 - Managing emotions
 - Autonomy toward interdependence
 - Developing interpersonal relationships
 - Establishing personal identity
 - Developing purpose
 - Understanding integrity



How can I be supportive as a parent/caregiver?

Parents and caregivers can support this by providing an empathetic listening ear, supporting their student's choice by following their lead to engage on campus and allow students to make calculated mistakes. Personal identity and growth is a fluid process and not all students take the same path. There is no right or wrong way—we acknowledge that students come from different lived experiences that may impact the way they engage on campus and grow as people.

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This chart is intended to be general and educational. It highlights what to expect developmentally, academically and socially through all four years at WPI. Common struggles are also listed.

What to Expect at WPI through the Years

Year	Possible Developmental Milestones Encountered in College	Academic Based Experiences	Social / Interpersonal / Personal Experiences
First Year	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shifting from adolescence to young adulthood • Transitioning to being on their own – separating from family and home life • Continuing to develop likes, interests, and preferences • Balancing social and academic demands and pressures • Seeking support to solve problems or overcome roadblocks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • first college level classes on a campus • Engaging in the Insight Program for PE credit while meeting peers and engaging professionally with a staff member • Declaring their major by the end of B-Term • Receiving their major specific advisor after major declaration • Learning about academic support resources on campus – like MASH, tutoring, ARC, or the SWEET Center • Registering for classes for the next academic year in D-term 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attending New Student Orientation events • Moving in with roommates • If a student is interested in living off campus next year, start looking in December for next academic year. • Trying many different activities and events • Experimenting with potential experimentation with drugs and/or alcohol • Learning about mental health, wellness, and support resources on campus • Engaging in professional development opportunities, including career fairs and Global Experience Fair • Joining a club, intramural team, or Greek Life • Voting in local, state, and national elections
Sophomore Year	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Starting to achieve competence in social and academic life • Beginning to establish personal independence • Continuing to develop identity and purpose • Exploring values • Making important educational and personal choices • Beginning to develop solutions to problems or roadblocks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Applying for IQP in B term • Considering refining and making a 4-year plan – don't forget those PE credits! • Meeting with faculty advisor to help guide academic choices • Getting involved in research or lab work • Updating resume and consider internships or summer work in a field of interest 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continuing to find new and different friend groups and solid support systems • Continuing to explore clubs, teams, and other groups on campus to widen your circle and expose yourself to new people • Identifying what support and engagement help with your work/life balance • Becoming a leader on campus in a club, ROTC, or through an on-campus job
Junior Year	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasing commitment to intimate relationships – both friendship and romantic • Continuing to gain a better sense of interdependence • Assessing and clarifying values in conjunction to the world around you • Continuing to engage in interests and things that bring joy • Increasing self-confidence in purpose and beliefs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engaging in more major specific programming • Completing IQP • Researching and securing MQP for next year • Considering a co-op for more experiential experiences • Applying for an internship • Questioning if major is right 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continuing to work on identifying what support is useful • A student might live off campus at this time • Continuing to practice skills around budgeting money, time management and school/life work/balance • Connecting with friends and significant others • NOTE: Some students turn 21 years old and are at legal age to drink alcohol and buy cannabis products
Senior Year	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brain has made significant development and growth • Making plans for personal and career beyond college • Deciding on future learning or work force employment • Generally, having a sense of self, regarding values, identity, and relationships • Deciding on what relationships are meaningful enough to continue pursuing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Completing MQP and present it at project presentation day • Meeting with advisors to ensure degree completions requirements have been met • Completing intent to graduate forms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Celebrating with friends, professors, and supervisors • Taking time to reflect on the time in college and look at all that was learned – personally, professionally and academically • Senior week activities • End of the year academic, club or program activities • Graduation ceremonies and celebrations

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Many of the struggles listed below are common. These are typical experiences for a vast majority of college students, both at WPI and in higher education in general. Students who face challenges and overcome them tend to display higher resiliency and report more personal growth.

Students might experience any struggle at any time through their college years. As appropriate, it is noted that some class years struggle with certain things more than others, though it is not exclusive or exclusionary.

Common Struggles Across Class Years

• Adjustment to the term-based schedule and fast-paced environment (first year)
• Homesickness (first year)
• Roommate conflict
• Symptoms of depression or anxiety that could be attributed to or amplified by transition and change
• Other emerging mental health concerns that have not been present before
• Learning appropriate study skills and organization (first year)
• Challenges with executive function and organizational skills
• Perfectionism
• Not wanting to access disability-related services or take supportive medication
• Peer-to-peer comparison around academics and personal life
• Self-doubt
• Lack of connection, social life, or community—not finding “your people” right away
• Romanticized idea of what college will be like
• Confusion about major or future direction
• Values clashing with others
• Experimenting with unhealthy and nonproductive coping behaviors
• Lack of effective stress management techniques
• Sexuality or gender identity questions
• Finding coping mechanisms that work
• Teammate/classmate conflict as students engage more deeply in their major requirements and classes
• Managing schedule, assignments, tasks, and activities
• Future and career planning stress (sophomore/junior year)
• Coping with family losses while away from home
• Relationship breakups and loss

