EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE LEARNING
What the Research Teaches Us About Its Importance to Students

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OVERVIEW

The research reviewed in this white paper provides compelling evidence that better developed emotional intelligence is predictive of student success and that emotional intelligence skills can be learned by students through workshops, courses, and intervention programs. It’s time for colleges to begin teaching emotional intelligence skills; everyone—including the institution that retains additional students to graduation—benefits!

SOME BACKGROUND ON EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

Many students who are intellectually capable of succeeding in college have difficulties with a variety of non-cognitive competencies such as time and stress management, establishing positive relationships, and making wise decisions. They may adopt dysfunctional coping styles that can cripple their academic efforts. Each of these problems can be described as a lack of emotional intelligence. With the current national graduation rate hovering around 55%, promoting emotional intelligence development in students should help raise retention and graduation rates, benefitting both students and institutions.

Emotional intelligence involves understanding and managing emotions effectively to achieve better individual and relationship outcomes. Emotions begin in the limbic area of the brain, which operates on a more primary level to fight, flee, or freeze—responses that are not often helpful for students’ everyday challenges. Effective management of emotions requires that emotions be processed through the frontal lobe, the higher or “executive function” area of the brain. Students’ frontal lobes are not fully developed until about the age of 25, leaving them vulnerable to actions and decisions that may be counterproductive. Given that humans experience over 300 emotions per day, it’s critical to practice more effective responses than fleeing (ignoring, withdrawing), fighting (verbal, emotional, sexual, or physical aggression; passive-aggressive behavior), or freezing (staying stuck, giving up, not cooperating). The more practice students get developing their emotional intelligence, the more they will build neuronal pathways to ensure that effective behaviors become more natural. For instance, the student who is frustrated by an assignment and typically gives up would learn different coping strategies that result in better outcomes. So would the angry student, the stressed out student, the unmotivated student, the disconnected student, and the student who cannot control impulses to party instead of study, among many others!
WHAT IS EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE?

Emotional intelligence involves a set of skills that can be learned and developed. The most widely researched and validated models of emotional intelligence (EI) incorporate non-cognitive skills such as

- recognizing and effectively managing one’s emotions;
- leveraging emotions to solve real-world problems;
- communicating effectively in emotionally-charged situations;
- making good decisions;
- building effective relationships; and
- managing stress.

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE AND STUDENT OUTCOMES: THE RESEARCH CASE

From achieving higher GPAs to engaging in less alcohol abuse, better-developed emotional intelligence (EI) gives students a significant advantage in college. According to Song and colleagues (2010) both general mental abilities and emotional intelligence contribute in unique ways to predicting academic performance. Emotional intelligence, but not general mental abilities, also predicted the quality of students’ social interaction.

First-Year College Students: Emotional Intelligence and GPA

Numerous researchers have verified the relationship between higher emotional intelligence and academic success as measured by GPA. For example, Mann and Kanoy (2010), in a study involving multiple institutions and over 1500 students found that first-year college GPA was predicted by the following EI scales:

- Optimism
- Independence (negative predictor)
- Self-regard
- Impulse control
- Problem solving

Parker, Duffy, Wood, Bond, & Hogan (2005) studied 1426 first-year students who attended four American universities. Students completed the Emotional Quotient Inventory: Short (EQ-i:S), an assessment which captures emotional and social intelligence, and were divided into two groups based on GPA: 1) successful, GPA of 3.0 or higher after the first semester and 2) unsuccessful, GPA of below 2.0 after the first semester. Comparisons between these groups revealed differences on 3 of the 4 EQ areas assessed including Interpersonal, Adaptability, and Stress Management. Gender differences were also found, with women scoring higher than men, a finding replicated by others at the college level (see, for example, Leedy and Smith, 2012).

Others examining data from their campuses confirmed the studies cited above and found that first year students with higher EI scores performed better academically (see, for example, Evenson, 2008; Song, Huang, Peng, Law, Wong, & Chen, 2010) and that the relationship between EI and better academic performance is applicable to student cohorts as wide-ranging as honors students to athletes (Jaeger, 2004). Perhaps most surprising is that even among students at a highly selective institution, optimism (an EI characteristic) was a better predictor of the first-year GPA than SAT score. (Schulman, 1995)
Emotional Intelligence, GPA, and Upper Classmen

The academic advantages of better emotional intelligence don’t just apply to first-year students.

In a longitudinal study, Sparkman and colleagues (2012) found that seniors who graduated four years after matriculation found that the EI skills of self-actualization, social responsibility, and happiness were positive predictors of cumulative GPA and independence and interpersonal relationships were negative predictors of cumulative GPA. It’s possible that students who are too independent don’t ask for help when needed, thereby hurting their chances to make better grades. And, students who are so engaged in connecting with others may ignore their academic work, also hurting their chances for a higher GPA.

Emotional Intelligence, Retention, and Graduation

Sparkman (2012) also investigated graduation four years after enrollment and found that the emotional intelligence characteristics of social responsibility, impulse control, and empathy were the strongest positive predictors of graduation and that flexibility was a negative predictor of graduation. While high flexibility probably benefits students in adapting to the many changes college presents, it may not be advantageous to be too flexible when it comes to declaring a major: the student who continually switches majors may accumulate too much debt or take longer than four years to graduate.

Kanoy (2011) found students who graduated four years after enrollment were higher than non-graduates on seven EI skill areas as first-year students including

- self-regard;
- self-actualization;
- independence;
- social responsibility;
- reality testing;
- impulse control; and
- happiness.

A telling fact related to the importance of EI in predicting college success is that there were no differences related to entering academic ability as measured by SAT and high school GPA.

While a certain level of academic skill is necessary to gain entrance to college, emotional intelligence skills appear to be more predictive of who completes college.

Most studies examine retention and graduation control for academic ability as measured by high school GPA or SAT scores. For example, Keefer, Parker, and Wood (2012) found that, even after controlling for high school grades and gender, the failure to graduate six years after enrollment with an initial sample size of 1015 students was predicted by lower emotional intelligence in the interpersonal and stress management (e.g., stress tolerance, optimism) domains. Parker and his colleagues (Parker, Hogan, Eastabrook, Oke, & Wood, 2005), using matched samples, found that students who were retained to year two of college had better developed emotional intelligence skills than those who were not retained.
EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE CAN BE LEARNED: TEACHING EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE TO STUDENTS

Research verifies that emotional intelligence can be taught to students and that increased emotional intelligence predicts better outcomes. For example, Qualter and colleagues (2009) found that students who showed an increase in EI as a result of an intervention program were more likely to persist with their studies than those not participating.

Schutte and Malouf (2002) taught emotional intelligence skills to students in a college transition course and compared them to students who complete a college transition course not focused on EI. Results were reported in terms of improvement in EI skills and retention:

1. The students in the EI-focused sessions, although slightly lower in overall EI compared to the comparison group at the beginning of the semester (126.88 to 130.79), exceeded their counterparts’ EI by the end of the semester (134.05 to 131.35), evidencing over a 7 point gain compared with about a .5 point in the comparison group, thus demonstrating that merely experiencing college life is not enough to improve EI skills.

2. Over 97% of the students in EI-focused sessions were retained at the end of the year compared with 86% of the students in the non-EI sessions, a statistically significant difference.

Research has shown that as little as a half-day training program on EI, when combined with an individual coaching session for the student, was associated with an improvement in EI skills (Carrick, 2010).

K.B.T. Chang demonstrated the effectiveness of infusing EI into an existing course, *The Psychology of Adjustment* (Chang, 2006). During the semester-long course, students taking the EI-infused section studied topics related to emotional intelligence and completed an EI focused self-improvement project, such as improving assertiveness or self-regard. Students in the EI-infused class compared to those in the regular section can benefit from EI instruction as shown by an increase in EI skills when measured before and after EI instruction.

Special populations of students can experience benefits from EI instruction as well. Martinez and colleagues (2014) found that:

Students on probation who participated in emotional intelligence skill development workshops had a retention rate 20% higher than those who did not.

And Manring (2012) fostered students’ emotional intelligence through service learning, demonstrating that there are multiple ways—and using existing programs—to develop students’ emotional intelligence.

STUDENT LEADERSHIP

Higher emotional intelligence is associated with higher scores on several scales of the *Student Leadership Practices Inventory*® (Student LPI®) including (Stang, 2009):

• Model the Way
• Inspire a Shared Vision
• Challenge the Process
• Encourage the Heart
Teaching emotional intelligence to students involved in leadership development programs makes a difference, according to Cavins (2005). Students enrolled in a four-year leadership development program were assessed for their emotional intelligence (using the EQi higher education assessment), leadership practices (using the Student LPI), and leadership performance.

Moderate to strong relationships were found between the EI scales of self-actualization, social responsibility, empathy, stress tolerance, problem solving, and optimism and subscales on the Student LPI. In particular, the top performers in terms of demonstrated leadership skills scored higher on over half of the emotional intelligence areas assessed compared with bottom performers.

Evidence points to emotional intelligence skills as foundational for predicting leadership success, as measured both by leadership assessments and leadership behaviors and performance.

Emotional intelligence skills appear to be foundational for predicting leadership success as measured both by leadership assessments and leadership behaviors and performance. For example, Wu and Stemler (2008) found that resident assistants (RAs) who possessed the highest emotional intelligence were also rated as the most effective RAs.

DECISION MAKING AND EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

Poor decisions such as abusing alcohol and choosing to party instead of study are associated with lower emotional intelligence. Deniz and colleagues (2009) found that students with higher emotional intelligence scores were less likely to procrastinate on their academic work. and Berenson, Boyles, and Weaver (2008) found that better developed EI predicted who performed best in online courses. Self-management skills are required for managing workload and time and thus, effective independent learning. Students with lower EI appear to lack the necessary self-management to thrive in online courses or even to complete their work in a timely way in traditional classes. While many students may not see poor time management as a “decision,” learning about emotional intelligence will help understand their “time” choices as decisions.

Other poor decisions, such as heavy alcohol or drug use, can derail a student’s college career. Claros and Sharma (2012) and Schutte, Malouf, and Hine (2011) found that students with less well-developed emotional intelligence were more likely to engage in heavy or episodic drinking, a major problem on many US campuses.

For a review of research related to student success and EI and career success and EI, see The Student EQ Edge: Emotional Intelligence and Your Academic and Personal Success (Stein, Book & Kanoy, 2013).
It’s long overdue: colleges and universities must actively and systematically teach emotional intelligence skills to our students. The sophomore student who is completing a difficult calculus problem needs intellectual power to solve the problem. But, what factors will ensure the following behaviors?

• that she stays positive and perseveres even when she struggles with a very challenging calculus problem?

• that she has not procrastinated, leaving inadequate time to complete the calculus assignment and the history paper that’s due tomorrow?

Simply put, intellectual skills (the ability to learn calculus) are necessary but not sufficient to ensure academic success. Emotional intelligence is a critical factor in determining a student’s success.

Each year the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) conducts a survey to query organizations about what skills they need in recent college graduates. Year after year, effective interpersonal communication, problem solving abilities, and the ability to plan and organize work appear on the list, and are all related to emotional intelligence. The table below summarizes the 2014 Job Outlook Spring Update.
Besides the academic benefits for students, there are two additional reasons to teach emotional intelligence on campus:

1. ensuring a well-educated citizenry and
2. improving the quality of life.

According to the US Census (2012), almost 70% of young adults aged 25–34 don’t possess a bachelor’s degree. Some of those students never enrolled in college, but others did—the six-year national average graduation rate of 55% reminds us that some enter college and never graduate.

**BUT WHY DON’T THESE STUDENTS GRADUATE?**

Answer: for some students, it’s a lack of academic skill, which only partially explains poor retention or graduation rates. Even students who are underprepared for college work can graduate if they wisely use campus academic resources—something that requires a willingness to receive feedback, strong goal-orientation, the resiliency and optimism to persist when challenged, good coping skills, and so on. All of these are emotional intelligence skills that can be learned. Even the recognition that one needs help requires well-developed emotional intelligence.

But what about the well prepared, perhaps academically gifted student who never graduates? Perhaps it was bad decision-making—such as a student who engages in academic or social misconduct and gets expelled, never enrolling elsewhere. Perhaps it was too much partying and not enough studying, which shows a lack of reality testing, a key EI skill area for college students.

The explanation for the academically capable—sometimes even gifted—student who never graduates most often resides in the emotional intelligence arena. It’s time to do something.
REFERENCES


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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

After serving for 31 years as a professor of psychology and academic dean, Kanoy now works with institutions interested in infusing emotional intelligence learning into programs and courses. She is the coauthor of *The Student EQ Edge: Emotional Intelligence and Your Academic and Personal Success* along with the accompanying *Facilitation and Activity Guide* and *Student Workbook*, all from Jossey-Bass. She can be reached at kkanoy@developmentalassociates.com.