

Making a Successful Transition During the First Year of College: Does Emotional Intelligence Matter?

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The transition from high school to higher education is a stressful experience for most students. The best evidence of this stress is the fact that at postsecondary institutions all across North America, many new students will drop out or transfer before graduation.

First-year college/university students face a variety of new challenges and adjustment issues. The ability to build new relationships while modifying existing relationships with family and friends is vital during this transition (Tinto, 1975, 1993). New students also need to learn study habits for an academic environment that is different from high school, as well as learn to live as relatively independent adults. Independence also means learning to manage time and money. Several key findings from the 2003 Your First College Year survey emphasize the importance of these factors (Keup & Stolzenberg, 2004).

More than one third of the student sample reported feeling “frequently overwhelmed by all they had to do.”

More than one third also felt “frequently” or “occasionally” a) lonely or homesick, b) worried about meeting new people, and c) a need to break away from their family in order to succeed.

Students indicated that “helping others who are in difficulty” and “integrating spirituality into my life” were “very important” or “essential personal goals”.

Students underwent significant changes in their self-concept over the first year of college.

Failure to meet challenges related to transitioning significantly impacts a student's ability to adjust, achieve, and persist during the first year of college. Chip Anderson, former UCLA administrator, notes that “More students leave college because of disillusionment, discouragement, or reduced motivation than because of lack of ability or dismissal by school administration”(Anderson, 2002, p. xii).

There is emerging evidence in the academic achievement literature that the successful transition from high school to university is linked with emotional intelligence (EI). The concept of EI was defined originally by Salovey and Mayer (1989/90) as “the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions” (p.189). This definition adapted Howard Gardner's (1983) earlier concepts of interpersonal intelligence (the ability to read the moods and desires of others) and intrapersonal intelligence (the ability to access one's own feelings and emotions). Bar-On (1997), who has worked extensively on developing a self-report measure for assessing EI, employs a broader definition of EI that includes adaptive capacities and abilities to control impulses and cope with stress, as well as intrapersonal and

interpersonal skills. This model was used to guide the development of the BarOn Emotional Quotient Inventory (EQ-i; Bar-On, 1997), published by MHS Inc. The BarOn EQ-i is a self-report instrument that assesses all of the dimensions outlined in the model (intrapersonal skills, interpersonal skills, adaptability, and stress management) along with other relevant variables (e.g., general mood).

In a recent study examining the transition from high school to university, Parker, Summerfeldt, Hogan, and Majeski (2004) found that various dimensions assessed by the short form for the EQ-i (EQ-i:Short; Bar-On, 2002) were important predictors of academic success. At the start of the academic year, a sample of full-time first-year students attending a university in central Ontario, Canada completed the EI measure. This data was matched with students' academic records at the end of the school year. The authors of this study found that academically successful students (those who had first-year GPAs of 3.0 or better) had significantly higher scores on most of the EI dimensions than less successful students (those with first-year GPAs below 2.0). These results have recently been replicated in several independent samples of American postsecondary students also making the transition from high school. Parker, Duffy, Wood, Bond, and Hogan (in press) collected EQ-i:Short data at the start of term with first-year students attending four American universities. When this data was matched with academic records at the end of the year, results were virtually identical to the Canadian study-EI was found to play an important role in the successful transition from high school to university.

The overall implications of the two previous studies are limited because they focused exclusively on predicting academic achievement (GPA). Academic retention is an equally important aspect of gauging student success. More recently, Parker, Hogan, Eastabrook, Oke, and Wood (2004) examined the relationship between EI and academic retention. Participants were selected from a large sample of students making the transition from high school to higher education. Participants were recruited during the first week of classes in their first year at the university and completed the EQ-i:Short. Participants' academic progress was tracked over the course of the year and students were divided into two groups. The first group consisted of students who withdrew from the university before the start of the second year of study. The second group consisted of a matched sample of students who remained at the university for a second year of study. Students were matched on the basis of age, gender, and ethnicity. Results revealed that students who persisted in their studies were significantly higher on most EI dimensions than participants who withdrew.

First-year programs at most colleges and universities spend considerable time and resources helping students with organization, time management, and related academic skills. The growing interest in EI within higher education is fueled by the fact that emotional and social skills can be enhanced, just like study skills, through targeted interventions. Schutte and Malouf (2002), for example, found that a course with a focus on emotions and the application of emotional skills gives first-year students resources that may be helpful in coping with academic and social adjustment challenges. Their findings indicated greater retention rates for students who participated in a freshmen transition course focused on emotions than students who did not receive such a course.

The evidence is building that EI matters and can be developed in students to impact retention and academic success. New tools like the EQ-i:S Post Secondary can assist institutions by proactively identifying those students at most risk of difficulty adjusting to a new environment. Individual student results can provide an indication of whether the student's current EI levels will foster academic success or inhibit achievement and persistence. More importantly, these tools pinpoint both EI strengths and opportunities for development. Strategies and curriculum can then target specific underdeveloped skills.

Future research could explore the impact learning communities have on emotional intelligence and related student success variables. Furthermore, determining if a connection exists between a student's emotional functioning and his or her engagement within the college environment may also prove beneficial. The predictive and developmental nature of EI is not limited to just first-year academic success, but has further reaching implications for career development, wellness, and leadership potential. As first-year programs continue to deliver the most appropriate curricula to foster academic and personal adjustment, use of EI in first-year seminars, orientation programs, advising, learning communities, residence halls, and other first-year interventions could yield a substantial, long-term return.

The complete essay is also available at
<http://www.sc.edu/fye/resources/assessment/newessay/author/parkerduffy.html>

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