

## Social-emotional learning: a model for higher education

Currently in the US pre K-12 education, there is an escalating focus on social and emotional learning (SEL). In fact, every state has established formal preschool SEL standards and expected outcomes for all students. In addition, the number of states that have SEL standards through grade 12 has increased from 1 in 2011 to an expected 16 by the end of 2019 (Dusenbury, 2018). By contrast, SEL frameworks are not broadly or systematically implemented in higher education. When present in higher education, SEL is generally provided as an intervention for targeted students, as opposed to a universal program for all students (Conley, 2015). This commentary will review the importance of the development of social and emotional competence, propose a multi-tiered system of support to develop social and emotional skills in higher education students and consider implications for related research.

The benefits of competence in social-emotional skills include improved academic achievement, better job performance and results, and enhanced physical and mental health (The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), n.d.). A deeper examination of the five dimensions of social and emotional skills reveals the relationship of these dimensions to a number of life outcomes. The first dimension, conscientiousness, is positively correlated with high school and college grades, as well as job performance. In addition, conscientiousness is negatively correlated with harmful behaviors, such as smoking, drug use, risky sex, unhealthy eating and others. The second dimension, openness to experience, also relates positively to high school and college grades. The remaining three dimensions, extraversion, agreeableness and emotional stability, exhibit positive correlations with task performance and organizational citizenship (OECD, n.d.).

Demonstrating proficiency in social and emotional skills increases the likelihood that students will do well academically, make healthier lifestyle choices, perform tasks well and willingly contribute to the good of organizations of which they are part. Knowing this, it seems reasonable to propose that higher education institutions create opportunities to explicitly teach social and emotional skills, especially for first-year and undergraduate students.

Supporting first-year college students during the transition to their new lives is a common practice in the US higher education (Cole, 2017). A variety of approaches and strategies are used to help new students adapt. Among these are the programs that address mental health, financial concerns, homesickness, adjustment to the academic demands of college, changes in career goals, campus culture and climate and more (Cole, 2017). These approaches, however, are focused on symptoms, rather than root causes. The approach proposed in this commentary is the implementation of a multi-tiered system of support. In this model, social and emotional skills are explicitly taught to all students and additional tiers, or layers, of support are provided for students who are experiencing higher degrees of stress, anxiety or related symptoms. Competence in these skills may help students develop and utilize effective strategies for overcoming the broad array of challenges they face as they transition to college.

The first layer, or tier one, is a universal curriculum in which students learn and practice social and emotional skills related to resilience, stress management, emotional regulation,



interpersonal effectiveness, and mindfulness (Mazza *et al.*, 2016). These skills are taught to all first-year students, are immediately helpful, and continue to be useful throughout a student's education and beyond. The second tier is targeted for students who encounter elevated challenges and is provided through the university counseling center. Counseling center staff members know the skills and strategies that are taught in the universal curriculum and can reteach and review the concepts and skills as an intervention. Targeted students benefit from additional instruction, practice and feedback relative to the core SEL curriculum. The final tier is one-on-one or small group counseling for students who are experiencing significant social or emotional issues during the transition to college. This intervention is conducted by trained and qualified counselors or therapists who have expert knowledge in SEL development. Though more intense, this intervention builds on the social and emotional skills students learned in the universal curriculum and practiced in the second-tier intervention.

Ultimately, this model offers opportunities for timely and relevant research. Despite a broad focus on the first-year transition in US colleges and universities, anxiety, stress, and retention continue to be areas of concern (Cole, 2017). Some institutions provide targeted support for students who face challenges (Conley, 2015). Few, if any, offer the multi-tiered approach proposed here. Institutions that apply and evaluate this model have an opportunity to lead the field in researching the outcomes of a multi-tiered system of support for social and emotional learning.

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## References

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