

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

Effectively Bridging the Gap Between High School and College

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The Javelina Emotional Intelligence (EI) Program at Texas A&M University-Kingsville described in this article received a national award from the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) as an exemplary program committed to student development, successful transition to college, achievement, and retention.

Note: This article has been accepted by the Texas Association of Secondary School Principals (TASSP) for publication in the TEXAS STUDY magazine for secondary education, Spring 2004 edition.

ABSTRACT

To explore the importance of emotional intelligence skills in student achievement and college success, the Emotional Skills Assessment Process (Nelson & Low, 1999, 2003) was administered to high school and first-year college students. The Emotional Skills Assessment Process of Exploring and Developing Emotional Intelligence Skills was found to be a valid and reliable measure of emotional intelligence, and specific skills important to student achievement and retention were identified. The authors offer suggestions and directions for research-derived instructional strategies, program development, and interventions to improve student achievement by developing specific emotional intelligence skills.

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Texas educators are challenged to leave no child behind and to close educational gaps created by underachievement and attrition. The current emphasis on academic accountability as reflected by tested performance needs to be complemented by a consideration of non-intellective factors that are essential to high achievement, personal well-being, and leadership.

Current research has concluded that emotional intelligence and related non-traditional measures of intelligence and human performance are as or more predictive of academic and career success than IQ tests and other measures of scholastic aptitude and achievement (Nelson and Low, 2003; Gardner, 1983, 1993, 1997; Sternberg, 1985, 1995; Goleman, 1995, 1997; Dryden and Vos, 1994; Astin and Associates, 1993; Townsend and Gebhardt, 1997; Weisenger, 1985, 1998; Cooper and Saway, 1997; and Epstein, 1998). Interdisciplinary research clearly indicates the importance of emotional intelligence and emotional skills to student achievement, career success, personal well-being, and leadership. These research findings emphasize the necessity of including emotional skill development in programs designed to improve student

achievement and academic success.

Traditional measures of scholastic aptitude, ACT, SAT, cumulative GPA, and rank in class have failed to provide a viable prediction model for academic success in college. Recent national surveys of first-year college students indicate that emotional and physical health declined by the end of their first year in college and feelings of depression and being overwhelmed increased (Bartlett, 2002). Primary reasons for student attrition and underachievement may not be academic. Personal factors such as loneliness and boredom (depression), lack of clear purpose (meaningful goals), and feelings of inadequacy (self esteem) are major reasons for attrition and low levels of achievement. While recognizing that the primary focus of education is academic performance, there is convincing research evidence that schools and colleges must also emphasize the learning and development of personal and emotional intelligence skills.

Historically, the emotional development of students does not come into focus unless behavior becomes problematic, i.e. dropping out, underachievement, violence, drug abuse, teen pregnancy, bullying, and lack of motivation. When severe problems become evident, educators attempt to help; however, the help is often too little and too late. Proactive and systemic programs for identifying and developing the emotional intelligence skills important to student achievement and personal well-being (mental, physical, and emotional health) are needed to prevent problematic behaviors rather than respond to them after the fact.

Extensive research was completed to develop and implement a project (The Javelina Emotional Intelligence Program) at Texas A&M University-Kingsville to identify and understand the effect of emotional intelligence skills on achievement. This education-based model of emotional intelligence was planned and designed to help students identify, learn, and

practice behaviors important to academic success in the first semester of college.

Research Methods

The Emotional Skills Assessment Process (Nelson and Low, 1999, 2003) was extensively normed and validated on high school and college students in South Texas. Research studies were designed and completed to determine the quality of measurement of the instrument and to clarify the role of gender and ethnicity in the assessment of emotional intelligence. Cross-cultural studies were completed to test the applicability of the assessment model with diverse student populations.

The Emotional Skills Assessment Process (ESAP) is a 213-item self-assessment instrument providing scale specific measures of ten emotional skills and three problematic indicators. ESAP skills measured are Assertion, Comfort, Empathy, Decision Making, Leadership, Drive Strength, Time Management, Commitment Ethic, Stress Management, and Self Esteem. The problematic indicators measured are Aggression, Deference, and Change Orientation. The instrument was constructed in an independent response format with a likert type rating scale for each item. Validity and reliability studies were completed in South Texas research samples with a high school population (Stottlemyer, 2002) and with a college population (Vela, 2003). In addition, an extensive study was completed with both high school and college student populations in Southeast China, utilizing a Chinese translation version of the ESAP (Nelson, Jin, and Wang, 2002).

Initial research from these studies indicated that the ESAP provides valid and reliable measurement of emotional intelligence skills and that these skills are significantly related to student achievement and mental health. Factor analytic studies in the South Texas and Chinese student samples indicated that the self-assessment instrument was providing consistent

measurement of common factors. A further indication from the research with Chinese students was that the ESAP scales were significantly related to mental health. These studies provided significant construct and predictive validity coefficients.

Research in progress with first year college students enrolled at Texas A&M University-Kingsville (Vela, 2003) supports previous research and identifies specific emotional intelligence skills important to academic success in the first semester of college. The Javelina Emotional Intelligence (EI) Program was developed and implemented as an integrated instructional and student development program to improve the academic achievement and retention of first year students.

Results

Initial research findings using the ESAP suggest that the emotional intelligence skills of Time Management (self management), Drive Strength (achievement drive), and Commitment Ethic (personal responsibility) are important influencing variables in student achievement and retention. Gender and ethnicity also are significant, and the quality of measurement provided by the ESAP is improved with gender and cultural specific norms (Stottlemyer, 2002 and Vela, 2003). An additional study (Nelson & Nelson, 2003) indicates that Time Management and Assertive Communication skills are significant predictors of success in college. These data suggest that developing institutional specific norms will improve instruction, program development, and interventions aimed at academic achievement and retention.

The EI Program, administered through University College, is a university-wide partnership organized through the required foundations course taught in all five undergraduate academic colleges. The program is designed to actively engage the student in both academic and self-directed experiential goal oriented activities. The rationale for the program is that emotional

intelligence, as a learned ability, is an important component for academic and career success.

The EI Program involves assessment and learning activities focused on emotional skill development in managing time, establishing personally meaningful goals, assuming personal responsibility, and linking students with support services to improve academic success behaviors.

Additional research is being completed to determine the intervention effects on student achievement and retention. An important finding of completed studies indicates that many students begin college with undeveloped skills in areas essential to academic and career success.

Discussion

The reported research findings clearly indicate that emotional intelligence skills are key factors in the academic achievement and tested performance of high school and college students in South Texas. If high schools and colleges want to improve student achievement and retention, especially the achievement and retention of students so essential to closing the gaps, emotional intelligence skills need to be systematically developed in instructional and proactive intervention programs prior to the first semester of college.

The transitional period following high school graduation and extending to enrollment in the first semester of college is critical. Time management, goal achievement, and personal responsibility skills are essential to student success in the first semester of college. Our research indicates that skill based transitional programs are needed prior to and during college enrollment. If we are to effectively bridge the gap between high school and college, emotional skill development must be emphasized along with cognitive and academic factors.

Emotional skill development requires a systematic and personalized learning approach that allows students to explore, identify, learn, improve, and apply specific behaviors important

to academic achievement and career success (Nelson and Low, 2003). The bridge from high school to college needs to be constructed around supportive interpersonal relationships emphasizing emotional skill development. Mentoring and coaching strategies are prerequisite to positive emotional development.

Recommendations

Our research is on-going and focused on developing research-derived instructional and skills-based intervention programs to help students develop more of their potential for academic success and personal well-being. Research findings to this point suggest the recommendations that follow:

- 1 College bound high school students need to be involved in skill development programs focused on the emotional intelligence skills of time management, drive strength (achievement drive), and commitment ethic (personal responsibility).
- 2 Gaps in achievement and retention are more effectively closed by developing skills-based transition programs (bridges) involving both high school and college personnel. Transition programs need to be cooperative and collaborative rather than competitive or institution specific.
- 3 High school and college students need to build effective communication skills and healthy relationships through programs emphasizing the emotional intelligence skills of assertion and stress management. Learning to effectively manage emotions and change is also indicated by emotional intelligence research.
- 4 Positive emotional skill development necessitates learning environments that are personalized (student/learner-centered) and focused on student success. The specific emotional intelligence skills identified by research need to be taught and

modeled within a context of supportive interpersonal relationships such as facilitated mentoring and coaching.

- 5 Fewer students will be left behind or abandoned by an educational process focused on healthy relationships that actively connect and involve students in personally meaningful experiential learning.

Texas educators are expected to do more and better things with fewer resources. Our research points to a need for a focus on positive emotional development in conjunction with the present emphasis on cognitive aspects and tested performance.

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