

Social-emotional learning in higher education: Examining the relationship between  
social-emotional skills and students' academic success

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## **Abstract**

Social-emotional learning (SEL) has shown positive effects on well-being and academic achievement for students in K-12 settings, but the SEL framework has yet to be applied to higher education to any substantial degree. SEL are programs designed to teach children and adults skills to recognize and manage emotions, solve problems effectively and establish positive relations with others. They are particularly relevant in college where students are confronted with a unique set of challenges and intrapersonal competencies that have been identified as crucial for college students' success. SEL requires institutional buy-in, time and resources, highlighting the need of proper justification for higher institutions that involves an accumulation of evidence that supports the impact of social-emotional skills on college student success. However, there are still several issues regarding the development of this evidence, such as: 1) the lack of conceptual coherence behind social-emotional skills; 2) contradictory evidence examining these skills and difficulty to identify which skills are the most important; 3) questions related to the validity of social-emotional skill measures; and 4) possible limitations in the outcomes analyzed by these skills.

This thesis presents two analyses that explore the impact of social-emotional skills in college student success. The first analysis uses quantitative survey and achievement data to model students GPA growth trajectory and year-to-year enrollment using social-emotional and background variables. The second analysis presents a qualitative assessment of students' written reflections to describe how students defined growth mindset, intelligence and then applied these constructs to their lives. Each analysis is detailed with their respective methods, limitations, and discussion section. In general, these two analyses found that: 1) the relationship between social-emotional skills is complex and not necessarily reflected in traditional measures of student achievement; and 2) the conceptual distinction between different social-emotional skills is not clear in practice, and the overlap between different skills suggests a broader framework is required to understand how these skills impact behavior. Implications for research and practice are provided.