



Emotional intelligence and academic success: examining the transition from high school to university

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Abstract

The transition from high school to university was used as the context for examining the relationship between emotional intelligence and academic achievement. During the first month of classes 372 first-year full-time students at a small Ontario university completed the short form of the Emotional Quotient Inventory (EQ-i:Short). At the end of the academic year the EQ-i:Short data was matched with the student's academic record. Predicting academic success from emotional intelligence variables produced divergent results depending on how the former variable was operationalized. When EQ-i:Short variables were compared in groups who had achieved very different levels of academic success (highly successful students who achieved a first-year university GPA of 80% or better versus relatively unsuccessful students who received a first-year GPA of 59% or less) academic success was strongly associated with several dimensions of emotional intelligence. Results are discussed in the context of the importance of emotional and social competency during the transition from high school to university.

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The transition from high school to university is a particularly stressful situation for most individuals (Brooks & DuBois, 1995; Cantor, Norem, Niedenthal, Langston, & Brower, 1987; Cutrona, 1982; Gall, Evans, & Bellerose, 2000; Kanoy & Bruhn, 1996; McLaughlin, Brozovsky, & McLaughlin, 1998; Perry, Hladkyj, Pekrun, & Pelletier, 2001; Pratt et al., 2000; Ross, Niebling, & Heckert, 1999; Stewart & Healy, 1985). The majority of high school students who go on to post-secondary institutions withdraw before graduation (Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994; Pancer, Hunsberger, Pratt, & Alisat, 2000). First-year university students face a variety of stressors:

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making new relationships, modifying existing relationships with parents and family (e.g. living apart), and learning study habits for a new academic environment. In addition, they must learn to function as independent adults (e.g. budgeting time and money). Failure to master these types of tasks appears to be the most common reason for undergraduate students withdrawing from university (see, for example, [Blanc, DeBuhr, & Martin, 1983](#); [Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994](#)).

The study of academic success in university and college has generated a sizeable literature (for a detailed review of the early literature, see [Tinto, 1993](#)). Much of the early research on academic success in post-secondary education focused specifically on the impact of previous school performance (i.e. high-school marks) and/or standardized measures of cognitive abilities. The predictive utility of this line of research proved to be quite limited, however, as these variables were found to account for relatively small amounts of variability in grade-point average (GPA) or student attrition ([Berger & Milem, 1999](#); [Johnson, 1997](#); [Mayer & Salovey, 1997](#); [Murtaugh, Burns, & Schuster, 1999](#); [Randsell, 2001](#)). With so much of the variance left unexplained, it is not surprising that researchers have turned their attention to a broad range of other possible predictors for academic success. Each of the following variables, for example, have attracted considerable research interest: full- or part-time attendance, employment status, being a member of an ethnic minority, family obligations, distance from home town, financial concerns, and gender (for reviews, see, [Lichtman, 1989](#); [Smith, 1982](#)).

A relatively small body of work has also sought to examine the relationship between academic success and emotional and social competencies. To date, this line of research has produced contradictory findings. [Wong, Day, Maxwell, and Meara \(1995\)](#), for example, found that social perception (the ability to understand the emotional states of other people) was a moderate predictor of academic performance among university students (using GPA as an indicator of academic success). [Sternberg, Wagner, and Okagaki \(1993\)](#) report a modest association between “practical intelligence” and academic performance (also assessed using GPA) in students making the transition from high school to university. More recently, however, [Newsome, Day, and Catano \(2000\)](#) found little association between academic success and emotional and social competencies when they used the 133-item BarOn Emotional Quotient Inventory (EQ-i; [Bar-On, 1997](#)). Participants were 180 volunteers from a first-year psychology course attending an eastern Canadian university. Students ranged in age from 17 to 56 years; full and part-time students were grouped together, as were students at different years of study (e.g. first-year students were grouped together with second, third and fourth-year students).

The inconsistent findings from previous research on emotional and social competency and academic success in post-secondary education may be the result of a number of methodological problems. Much of the previous research has focused on a narrow range of abilities (e.g. social perception or practical intelligence) or has assessed academic success over very narrow time-lines. Although [Newsome et al. \(2000\)](#) attempted to assess a broad range of emotional and social competencies, they may have compromised the interpretability of their data by combining into a common data-set full and part-time students, young adults and mature students, and students at different stages of the transition process (e.g. first-year students versus students about to graduate from university). Full and part-time students experience unique challenges and stresses while coping with their academic careers. Students at different stages of their post-secondary programs (e.g. first-year students vs. graduating students) also experience very different life demands. [Archer and Lamnin \(1985\)](#) report that younger students are more concerned with grades, studying, and peer

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