

## Chapter 8

# The Roles of Social and Emotional Skills on the Beliefs and Behaviors of Diverse College Students

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### ABSTRACT

*In the United States, college students of color are disproportionately impacted by mental health problems, the COVID-19 pandemic, and sociopolitical stressors. This growing disparity calls for culturally responsive and accessible interventions to educate, equip, and empower students for socioemotional skills and mental health. An experiential social emotional learning (SEL) intervention was created at the University of California-Irvine to help undergraduates in all majors and class standing build skills, attitude, and strategies for academic and career readiness. Students in the intervention showed significantly greater improvement in emotional intelligence, adaptive beliefs, and healthy coping behaviors toward mental health. The intervention showed promising efficacy during the COVID-19 pandemic, despite moving from in-person to online delivery. The author shares insights on how to design, implement, and scale culturally responsive SEL academic interventions for diverse college students.*

### OPPORTUNITY TO SUPPORT MENTAL HEALTH IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Half of all lifetime mental health disorders start by age 14; three-fourths begin by age 24 (Kessler et al., 2005). Since early detection, treatment, and prevention predict better life outcomes, adolescence is a salient period for providing mental health interventions. However, recent studies found that, between 2008 and 2017, suicide increased by as much as 56% among 18-to-25-year-olds (Hedegaard et al., 2018). Attempted suicides rose by 87% among 20- and 21-year-olds and 108% among 22- and 23-year-olds. Today's college students reported the highest stress and anxiety levels compared to any prior generation

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(Twenge et al., 2019). This deteriorating trend demands more mental health services beyond late teens. Postsecondary education has become increasingly accessible and ubiquitous; close to 70% of U.S. high school graduates enrolled in college in 2018 (Hussar et al., 2020). From a public health standpoint, colleges provide a unique opportunity for supporting prematriculation onsets, relapses, and prevention measures during this critical time (Auerbach et al., 2016).

## **The Development of Social and Emotional Skills in Emerging Adults**

Emerging adulthood is a distinct period that lasts from late teens through the 20s and marks the transition from adolescence to adulthood (Arnett, 2014). When newly-minted emerging adults embark on their journey as college students, they are met with abrupt disruptions in their everyday support structures. They must also establish a sense of self and social support within a broader network of academic, social, and institutional systems. During this period of increased independence, emerging adults grapple with their narratives about and expectations of the “normal” that their sociocultural upbringing has shaped (Chan et al., 2019).

The escalating pressures of new responsibilities do not stop after the freshman year. As they move beyond general education classes, freshman support, and parent monitoring, students are expected to cope with uncertainties and make responsible decisions on their own, while preparing for the impending transition into the workforce. The state of their mental health and well-being is frequently tested with new setbacks—as when a major does not work out, living arrangements change, financial obligations grow, and relationship woes arise. Students who are not prepared to cope adaptively with these stressors are at a greater risk of persistence in college and in life.

Advances in brain development suggest a second critical period of dynamic cortical pruning of white and gray matter that occurs from age 13 to 25—an age much later than once believed (Chung & Hudziak, 2017). From a neurobiological perspective, emerging adulthood is still a period of profound development for key regions of the brain: The nucleus accumbens, amygdala, and prefrontal cortices. The last to functionally mature is the prefrontal cortex, which plays a crucial role in executive functioning that is involved in emotional regulation, judgment, and cognitive flexibility. From a developmental science perspective, it is the dynamic integration and maturation of affect, cognitive, and behaviors that give rise to personal effectiveness and social mastery. This interrelated and iterative process of learning and adaptation shapes the outcomes of mental health and social functioning (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). Thus, college mental health services must provide “anticipatory guidance” in the forms of supportive relationships and socioemotional skills-building programming.

## **Equipping College Students with Social and Emotional Skills**

Emerging research found that college students today, on average, show a significant decline in their ability to perceive, express, and regulate emotions (Khan et al., 2021). Emotional intelligence (EI) refers to “the ability to monitor one’s own and others’ feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and use this information to guide one’s thinking and actions” (Salovey & Mayer, 1990, p. 189). EI enables an individual to accurately recognize, appraise, express, and manage emotions and adaptively use this information to solve problems, make decisions, and regulate behaviors. The ability to accurately perceive and manage emotional states and express feelings to others for social support are intimately linked to physical and psychological health benefits.

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