

## **Embedding Social and Emotional (SEL) Design to Support College Student Well-Being and Learning Outcomes: A Review of the Relevant Literature**

Victoria Laura DeSensi  
Wilmington College

### **Abstract**

Psychological well-being plays a significant role in the lived experiences of college students. As more college students report experiencing psychological distress and fewer persist to graduation, students require guidance in developing the skills and mindsets to successfully navigate their academic experiences. Some recent evidence suggests that psychosocial protective factors, such as social support and self-efficacy, are closely tied to academic success. Moreover, researchers have a growing interest in examining elements of educational design and their links to mental health and academic success. The purpose of this literature review is to put forth evidence that demonstrates the value of embedding elements of social and emotional learning (SEL) design to improve college students' well-being and learning outcomes. SEL design principles help students to set purposeful goals, build relationships, gain self-regulation skills, and develop self-efficacy.

**Keywords:** social and emotional learning (SEL), college, well-being, mental health, learning outcomes, educational design

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Social and emotional learning (SEL) design represents a curricular approach, focused on the development of intrapersonal and interpersonal skills and mindsets, that has been actively shaped over several decades. In 2013, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) published a framework organized around five core competencies that are interconnected: *self-awareness*, *self-management*, *social awareness*, *relationship skills*, and *responsible decision-making*. In the K-12 setting, programs grounded in the CASEL framework help cultivate skills and mindsets to support academic achievement (e.g., Mahoney et al., 2021).

Ferreira et al. (2020) emphasize the value of SEL core competencies, and they argue for educational institutions to strongly consider including SEL in strategic planning, curriculum, and school policy-making. Applying the CASEL framework for organizing SEL competencies at the college level can help students develop an array of core competencies that foster well-being and that support long-term success. A recent survey conducted by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) found that employers rated social and emotional skills as the top attributes that employers sought in job candidates (NACE, 2017). Moreover, college students and parents/caregivers perceive social and emotional skills and mindsets – such as goal setting, collaboration, self-regulation, time management, self-efficacy, resilience, and engagement – to be essential for student success in educational contexts and beyond (Daley & Murano, 2023).

SEL-inspired design, grounded in the CASEL framework, offers students opportunities to set purposeful goals, build relationships, gain self-regulation skills, and develop self-efficacy. The purpose of this paper is to present evidence that embedding an SEL design curricular approach can help college students develop the skills and mindsets that support their well-being and learning outcomes.

### **College Student Well-Being**

The American College Health Association (ACHA) National College Health Assessment report (2019) indicates that college students report stress, anxiety, and depression to be substantial barriers that hinder their academic success. Lipson and Eisenberg (2018) used data from the Healthy Minds Study (HMS), a national survey that examines mental health and related factors in college student populations, to explore the relationship between student mental health and key determinants of academic experiences. Their findings suggest that mental health issues among college students are significant predictors of academic dissatisfaction and dropout intentions. Although the mental health assessments administered for this survey were not equivalent to the assessments used in official clinical diagnosis, Lipson and Eisenberg encourage faculty to recognize the importance of supporting students' psychological well-being as a path to academic achievement.

Supporting college student success requires an understanding of how students experience stress and mental health within the college setting. Researchers have recently begun to explore students' experiences with their psychological well-being within environments of higher education. Sherman (2019) used transcendental phenomenological methodology, primarily concerned with describing the individual's experience of a phenomenon, or event of interest, to understand the mental health challenges of college students. From Sherman's analysis of interview commentary, one common theme that emerged from the participants' comments was the importance of goal setting in successfully dealing with the demands of college.

Researchers have also recently become interested in studying the psychological well-being of first-generation college students (FGCS). FGCS tend to face more hardship than that experienced by their non-FGCS peers. Swanbrow et al. (2017) conducted a qualitative study that involved thematic analysis of data collected from focus groups and semi-structured interviews with FGCS. Participants were enrolled in an academic enrichment program, GenOne, designed to help students successfully transition to college. Students indicated that their membership in GenOne supported their well-being by, for example, helping them develop a sense of belonging. The program also helped students by equipping them with self-regulation skills to prevent stressful situations from becoming debilitating.

Stanton et al. (2016) also chose a qualitative design to explore students' perceptions and experiences of well-being and thriving within higher education learning environments. Data collection was conducted via focus groups and interviews with students enrolled at a Canadian university. The results revealed pathways, most notably building relationships, through which well-being and learning can be supported within educational settings. Relationship-building activities foster a sense of connection and help to establish an authentic learning community that effectively supports students' well-being and mastery of learning outcomes.

Taken together, this sampling of recent research indicates that supporting college students' psychological well-being and academic success should take into account the importance of goal setting and purpose, building sense of belonging through relationships, and the development of self-regulation skills.

### **Psychosocial Protective Factors and Learning Outcomes**

Recent research on college student well-being and academic success has explored psychosocial factors that can significantly impact college students' academic learning outcomes. Psychosocial factors involve the sociocultural and environmental influences that affect mental health and behavior (VandenBos, 2015). Swanson et al. (2021) conducted a longitudinal descriptive analysis to examine the relationship between psychosocial protective factors and academic learning outcomes in higher education settings. Among the protective factors Swanson et al. investigated were social support and academic self-efficacy. Self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977) refers to an individual's belief in their capacity to act in ways that support reaching their goals. Swanson et al. found a positive association between each of the psychosocial protective variables included in their study and students' academic achievement, as measured by grade point average (GPA). Similarly, Maddux and Kleiman (2016) found that students with higher levels of self-efficacy demonstrated higher academic goal setting and earned higher grades (on average).

Researchers have also been interested in variables that moderate the impact of stress on academic achievement. In Frazier et al.'s (2019) investigation of the relationship between stress and GPA, the psychosocial protective factors of coping self-efficacy, resilience, and social support were found to partially explain the relationship between stress and academic outcomes. Students with higher stress and fewer psychosocial protective factors tended to have poorer academic achievement. Sawatzky et al. (2012) similarly found that helping students to develop self-efficacy beliefs can protect them from feeling overwhelmed by their academic challenges.

Canning et al. (2019) detected a positive relationship between students' perceptions of their instructor's beliefs in the students' ability to meet goals and the students' sense of belonging, engagement, and academic performance. In the work of Sherman (2019), some

students acknowledged the value of not just pursuing a specific goal, but of also having a sense of purpose in keeping them academically motivated while managing their mental health. Connecting course material to one's sense of purpose and own values has been found to benefit interest, motivation, and engagement (Harasckiewicz & Priniski, 2018).

Taken together, these research results indicate that supporting college students' psychological well-being and academic success should take into account the role of psychosocial protective factors such as self-efficacy, resilience, and sense of purpose.

### **Elements of Learning Design in Relation to Well-Being and Learning Outcomes**

Supporting college students' well-being and mastery of learning outcomes requires an understanding of the relationship between these variables and the elements of learning design. Learning design involves planning and developing course objectives, activities, and assessments. Stanton et al. (2016) encourage faculty to move beyond the work already done in counseling centers and to focus on the elements of learning design. Dyjur et al. (2017) linked elements of learning design, such as policies and values, academic expectations, and learning environments, to the psychological experiences of college students and instructors alike. Directly addressing learning design, Coleman (2022) notes that "many of the practices that are beneficial for teaching and learning are also useful from a mental health perspective" (p. 173).

Faculty are encouraged to use peer learning, a collaborative practice, to create an educational environment that simultaneously promotes psychological well-being and learning outcomes. Using data from the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education (WNS), Hanson et al. (2016) explored the longitudinal effects of peer learning, defined by the authors as incorporating elements of cooperative and collaborative learning, on different dimensions of psychological well-being. The WNS includes psychosocial measures completed at the start and end of the student's college career. The data from this study indicate that peer learning has at least a modest influence on certain dimensions of psychological well-being such as autonomy, mastery, and a sense of purpose.

To better prepare students for the 21<sup>st</sup> century workforce, some educators have shifted to problem-based and project-based learning. These experiential learning designs, framed around real-world problems, help students to develop collaborative solutions that address community and social problems. Building healthy relationships between students and teachers through collaborative learning experiences is fundamental to students' engagement, social development, mental health, and academic success (Cooper et al., 2017). College students are also found to have a stronger sense of purpose and motivation in school when provided opportunities outside of the classroom for hands-on learning experiences (Lanning & Brown, 2019).

Coleman (2022) suggests that "ungrading," can foster a growth mindset that supports resilience and coping self-efficacy. Ungrading (Blum, 2021) is an assessment practice that moves beyond the conventional A through F system that relies on grades as extrinsic motivators. Heinz (2022) recommends "ungrading" to reduce the stress that students experience with academic assignments and assessments. Low stakes assessments have similarly been found to reduce student anxiety (Meer & Chapman, 2014). One form of "ungrading" is competency-based education. Competency-based education represents an unconventional approach that uses an intrinsically-rewarding system to help students gauge where they are in the learning process. It also creates space for students to pause, reflect, and identify any significant gaps in their

knowledge base. Making sure those gaps get appropriately filled is one of the key components of competency-based design.

Taken together, research indicates that design elements, such as collaborative learning and competency-based education, can support student well-being and mastery of learning outcomes.

### **Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Design**

There have been calls for higher education institutions across North America to assume cooperative responsibility for incorporating SEL programs beyond what is available in the K-12 setting (Millett, 2020). Stocker and Gallagher (2019) explored the efficacy of a semester-long SEL program implemented in a college classroom setting. The authors adapted the majority of their research-backed activities from the Greater Good in Action (GGIA) Curriculum Guide, produced by the Greater Good Science Center. The intervention consisted of meaningful weekly experiential learning activities that students completed primarily outside of regular class sessions. Stocker and Gallagher specifically designed their SEL program to minimize student anxiety and to foster a positive reappraisal of stressors. The results revealed that SEL activities can help students shift their mindset and learn to view their stressors as challenges.

To promote sustainable SEL in K-12 settings, Ferreira et al. (2020) proposed a conceptual model regarding how to embed SEL practices into daily lessons. The novelty of this model is apparent in the sustainable integration of SEL into everyday teaching practices. Some of the SEL-supportive practices suggested by Ferreira et al. include relationship-centered learning activities and formative assessments. In the context of higher education, there is limited research on the impact of embedded SEL design, but a bit of recent evidence signals its potential to efficiently and effectively improve college students' well-being and learning outcomes. Wyatt and Bloemker (2013) redesigned a college freshman seminar to infuse social and emotional skills into the curriculum with the goal of helping students to be more academically successful. They offered ideas for specific content, assignments, and pedagogical techniques. Similarly, Wang et al. (2012) found that integrating an SEL curriculum into an existing freshman seminar course can help students develop skills - such as time management, emotion regulation, and perspective-taking - that help support overall academic achievement.

Significant barriers exist within educational institutions, such as insufficient resources and competing priorities (Millett, 2020), that hinder the promotion of essential skills. Higher education professionals are encouraged to consider embedding SEL design into students' academic experiences to foster the social and emotional skills that support academic success.

### **Conclusions**

The extant literature makes it evident that supporting college student well-being and mastery of learning outcomes requires efforts to help students develop an array of psychosocial protective factors to combat the negative impact of psychosocial challenges on college students' well-being (Stocker & Gallagher, 2019) and academic performance (Frazier et al., 2019). Research has shown that students acknowledge the value of pursuing a specific goal and having a sense of purpose in keeping them academically motivated while managing their mental health (Sherman, 2019). Feeling socially connected has been found to positively influence students'

motivation and persistence (Zundans-Fraser & Bain, 2020). Self-regulation and self-efficacy skills have also been found to be associated with improved academic goal setting and academic outcomes in higher education settings (Maddux & Kleiman, 2016; Swanson et al., 2021).

To address a gap in the literature pertaining to interventions that concurrently target the mental health needs and academic achievement of college students, Antunes and Langmuir (2021) evaluated the From Intention to Action (FITA) program. This intervention, designed for students at-risk for academic failure and who may be experiencing mental health problems, involved a feedback session with a registered psychologist and weekly sessions with a counselor for up to 12 weeks. Antunes and Langmuir found that the FITA program led to statistically significant improvements in the mental health and academic performance for at-risk students. As more students experience psychological distress and fewer students persist in college, interventions designed to target both well-being and learning outcomes are undoubtedly needed (Zundans-Fraser & Bain, 2020).

To support the inclusion and success of all students and to sustain the cultural competence of their different communities, educators must be equipped to create a culturally responsive SEL environment (Yeh et al., 2022). There is great value in employing inclusive teaching pedagogies that are culturally sustaining and that draw upon the assets of a diverse student body. Inclusive teaching that involves culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) promotes a classroom environment that is welcoming and equitable. Inclusive practices are indeed fundamental to the well-being and academic success of all students.

Traditional notions of academic rigor can be detrimental to student well-being. In an increasingly complex and anxiety-provoking local and global environment, a traditional curriculum secured to rigid standards is inhumane, inequitable, and inauspicious. Wong and Mishra (2021) proclaim that we are in the midst of a global education crisis and that the time is ripe for rethinking education. They argue that, to evolve beyond a rigid and antiquated standards-based curriculum, we must reform schools around a humanizing curriculum that “values not just academic knowledge but also self-, social, and cultural knowledge” (p. 3). A humanizing curriculum that fosters psychosocial protective factors through embedded SEL design principles can redefine notions of rigor and competency. Educators can indeed support college student well-being while simultaneously preparing those students to become skilled 21<sup>st</sup> century learners, professionals, and citizens.

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