

Social-Emotional Learning Is the Rage in K-12. So Why Not in College?

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Whether you believe the [purpose of college](#) is to foster intellectual curiosity or simply to land a job after graduation, emotional well-being is a prerequisite to both. [Research](#) links learning ability to social and emotional health, which will become [increasingly important](#) for workplace success in the coming decades.

Yet, mental health is a growing crisis within both [secondary schools](#) and [universities](#), where demand for counseling services is rapidly outstripping supply. Given the critical importance of mental well-being for student success both in school and after, how can schools evolve to better serve students in this area?

According to 30 years of research, the answer lies in the [power of prevention](#). The logic works like this: if we embrace preventive care for our bodies (like rushing to remove healthy wisdom teeth), why are social and emotional issues only addressed through reactive services after they mature to the point of crisis?

Seeing this irony, organizations like the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning ([CASEL](#)) and researchers like [Dr. Valerie Shapiro](#) at UC Berkeley have worked to develop, implement and evaluate Social & Emotional Learning (SEL) [programs](#) in thousands of K-12 schools across the US.

And the [results](#) are incredible—over 50 programs have been found effective for reducing anxiety, depression, alcohol and drug use, risky sexual behavior and other behavioral health problems. As if that wasn't enough, the largest [meta-analysis](#) of 213 SEL programs across 270,000 K-12 students also demonstrated an average 11 percentile point increase in academic achievement (eg. test scores increasing from 60/100 to 71/100).

If SEL programs can improve both mental health *and* academics in K-12—then why not in college?

Existing College SEL Programs

Seventy percent of mental disorders begin [prior to age 25](#), and college is a time when students face unique challenges like freshman year [impostor syndrome](#) and living away from family for the first time. Are we learning from the success of SEL in K-12 and building preventive programming for students' formative college years as well?

For some colleges, the answer is yes.

The 2015 edition of the [Handbook of SEL Research and Practice](#) describes 113 short-duration college intervention programs in SEL-related areas like mindfulness, meditation, relaxation, social skills development, and cognitive-behavioral change. Of these, mindfulness programs seem most promising, and programs are only effective when they are skills-based with built-in supervised practice (ie. lecture alone doesn't work).

In addition to intervention programs, which are largely run by researchers and dissociated with curriculum, a few colleges have begun to create courses that directly incorporate SEL content.

The world needs colleges that embrace the social and emotional aspects of education, in addition to the purely intellectual pursuits.

Widener University has a [freshman seminar](#) on the successful transition from high school to college, where SEL competencies like relationship skills and emotional management are taught alongside academic skills like test taking, time management, and active learning.

Community colleges are also getting involved, like Bronx Community College, which built SEL content into its communications [course](#) to provide students with job interview skills.

Although it's certainly encouraging to see individual professors and researchers taking interest, colleges need to ask themselves whether band-aid courses and programs are ultimately adequate to meet students' needs.

According to the [Handbook](#) of SEL Research and Practice: "To date, programs that promote social and emotional competencies in higher education tend to be researcher-initiated, relatively brief interventions that are disconnected from the institutions' curricula, staff, and goals".

If SEL and preventive emotional care are truly critical to student success and well-being, why don't we place them at the center of our curriculum? How can we evolve these early programs and courses into the integrated, long-term, university-wide approaches students need?

What's the Future of College SEL?

At the [Minerva Schools](#), we've prototyped what an integrated approach to college SEL might look like.

Our thesis is that one route to effective SEL and preventive mental health lies at the intersection of character education, community building and traditional counseling center services.

We start by explicitly teaching character development. All incoming freshman are part of a Supper Club, communities where students meet every two weeks for workshops and discussions on our seven

character values: Curiosity, Empathy, Resilience, Focus, Collaboration, Initiative and Respect. Some sessions are designed to build a common language and norms for understanding and managing emotions (like traditional SEL programs), while others are student-only spaces for sharing and reflection.

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Next, community programs provide spaces for students to practice these values. On Sundays, students gather to cook food from their respective countries and share the culture and values they grew up with (#Curiosity, #Collaboration). A weekly Minerva Talks program allows students to distill their life story into an hour-long talk and share it with the rest of the community (#Focus, #Respect). And a half marathon hike as part of Spring re-orientation provides the opportunity to practice values like #Resilience, and #Initiative.

Finally, we foster preventive mental health by closing the gap between traditional counseling service and SEL / character development programs. For example, community [Fishbowl](#) discussions and a [Student Support Network](#) bystander training program provide spaces for students to talk candidly about mental health issues and how students in the community can better support each other.

We see this trinity of character education, community development, and mental health programming as key to adopting an integrated, long-term approach to SEL and preventive mental health across the

institution.

A few other schools are also moving toward a program-wide approach. [Deep Springs](#) college is well known for its labor program, where all students develop skills like leadership, community building, and responsibility by working to complement their academics. And Stanford Graduate School of Business's "[Touchy Feely](#)" course, which helps students develop healthy professional relationships, has become a staple of the curriculum and the school's most popular elective for over 45 years.

It's strange that preventive emotional care and character education are rarely taught explicitly, though they are prerequisites for learning and long-term student success. We hope that other college programs will be similarly inspired to build their own frameworks combining SEL, preventive mental health, and traditional classroom education.

If you are a college administrator, faculty or staff member, I encourage you to start this conversation on your campus. The world needs colleges that embrace the social and emotional aspects of education, in addition to the purely intellectual pursuits.

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