ABSTRACT

Noncognitive skills are a rather popular topic in higher education today. Factors such as “grit,” “character,” and “growth mindset” are an increasing part of many student success efforts. This chapter will discuss several issues related to noncognitive factors, seeking to bridge the gap from research to practice. First, we will review various ways in which the noncognitive space has been defined. Second, we will review research supporting the relevance of noncognitive variables in higher education, including their espoused importance, empirical relationships with student outcomes, and finally, evidence that such factors can serve a somewhat compensatory role for many students. Third, we will provide an overview of methods of assessing noncognitive tools, particularly within a context of student retention and success. Finally, we will review common practices to implementing noncognitive factors in student success strategies, including holistic placement, enhanced student advising, and other interventions focused directly on the development of noncognitive skills.

INTRODUCTION

Historically, a great deal of research on student retention and success has focused on identifying the characteristics of those who succeed versus those who do not. Much of this research has focused on demographic, academic, contextual, and socioeconomic factors associated with student success. For example, students from certain minority groups, first-generation college students, and students with lower levels of academic preparation have tended to experience lower rates of success than do their peers (Burrus et al., 2013; Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006). Eaton and Bean (1995) referred to
this avenue of research as taking a sociological approach to understanding student success. While this research has identified many traditionally underserved populations, Eaton and Bean pointed out that “we know less about the characteristics of individuals within such a group that increase the likelihood of their remaining in school until graduation” (p. 617).

One strand of more recent studies of “noncognitive” (aka “soft skills,” or “character”) factors and their relationships with student success has approached the topic from a psychological rather than a sociological perspective. That is, they have focused on key behaviors, skills, attitudes, and mindsets that successful students employ (e.g., Poropat, 2009; Richardson, Abraham, & Bond, 2012; Robbins et al., 2004). This work has also sought to reveal how to best identify and assess such factors, as well as examining methods of fostering them in students to help them navigate the challenges they will face in higher education. The field has established a group of factors related to both academic and persistence-related outcomes, further demonstrating that these factors are predictive of academic success even when controlling for many traditional markers of academic preparation.

Turning an explicit focus on noncognitive factors may represent a change to the daily practice of institutions focused on student retention and success. Most faculty and staff are not accustomed to assessing and teaching skills such as perseverance, self-efficacy, or help-seeking behavior directly. Of course, these important elements have been an implicit focus of many curricular and co-curricular interventions. These and other similar factors are also identified as critically important by advisors, instructors, and administrators. By transitioning from implicit to explicit attention to noncognitive factors, colleges and universities may gain the ability to better understand and address these vital behaviors with their students as integral parts of existing efforts to improve retention rates.

In this chapter, we discuss several issues related to understanding noncognitive factors as they relate to student success in higher education, summarizing important research findings and offering practical recommendations. First, we review several ways in which the noncognitive construct space has been defined in the field, discussing frameworks articulating an array of skills, behaviors, and mindsets. Second, we review research supporting the relevance and importance of noncognitive variables to higher education, including their empirical relationships with student outcomes and evidence of their potential to serve in a compensatory capacity for some students, helping to overcome other challenges students may bring to college. Third, we provide an overview of methods for assessing noncognitive constructs, with particular attention to the context of student retention and success efforts. Finally, we review common practices aimed at integrating attention to noncognitive factors within student success strategies. These include holistic placement, enhanced student advising, and other interventions focused directly on the development of noncognitive skills.

**REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

The term “noncognitive” has increased in prevalence over the last several years - in higher education as well as other sectors - but there appears to be little consensus as to what factors define the noncognitive space. The foundational meta-analyses that demonstrated the value of such variables in both workforce (Bowles, Gintis, & Osborne, 2001) and educational (Heckman & Rubenstein, 2001) sectors generally referred to “noncognitive” factors as those being outside the targeted scope of traditional measures of cognitive ability. Many educational practitioners question the use of the term “noncognitive,” pointing out that nearly everything we do in our daily lives (apart from involuntary physical responses) involves...
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