

## PROMISING PRACTICE

# Fostering an Emotionally Intelligent Learning Assistance Environment

Jenna Guenther

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Jenna Guenther is the mathematics coordinator for the Science and Math Learning Center in the Learning Centers at James Madison University (JMU). Jenna is an alumna of JMU having earned a Master of Arts in Teaching focused in secondary math and a Bachelor of Science in Mathematics. She is also currently pursuing a Master of Education in Mathematics from JMU. Jenna began her journey in higher education learning assistance as a peer math tutor in JMU's Science and Math Learning Center during her undergraduate career, then served as a graduate assistant for the same center, and ultimately transitioned to her faculty coordinator role.*

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2847-3005>

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Learning is inescapably an emotional process. Regardless of the content, emotions are omnipresent and impact the effectiveness of a learning experience. Some students and educators believe they can remove emotion from learning, creating an anecdotal dichotomy of the head (thinking and learning) versus the heart (feeling and emotion). However, this separation is an illusion because the brain is the foundation of both thinking and feeling, and they are naturally interconnected.

Sousa (2017) explained that the brain consists of many structures that interact to allow the body to function physically, mentally, emotionally, etc. Specifically, the frontal lobes and prefrontal cortex are responsible for logical thinking and problem solving, whereas the limbic system is responsible for emotions and meaning creation. Sousa (2017) further offered that though these systems may appear to be independent of each other, human functioning relies on their interplay, in which the systems can be in varying levels of harmony and conflict. Since the limbic system involves more impulse and intuition, emotion can often overpower the rational system. Thus, our emotions act like a gatekeeper to learning because with productively regulated

emotions, we can focus on target knowledge and skills, but unregulated emotions can hinder the brain's rational functions and our ability to focus on learning.

Acknowledging the interconnectedness of emotional and rational processing is an imperative first step in appreciating the act of learning, but truly grasping the complexity of emotions requires more depth. Emotional intelligence (EI) is not an incredibly new idea as Salovey and Mayer originally coined the term in 1990 to describe the skills influencing how people assess, convey, regulate, and act on the emotions of themselves and others. In the last 30 years, psychologist Daniel Goleman, among others, has expanded the literature surrounding EI, pioneering that a high level of EI is more important to achieving success than traditional intelligence (Goleman, 1995, 1998; Goleman & Boyatzis, 2017; Goleman et al., 2013). Goleman has adapted his EI framework over time, though the foundation has remained steady. Most recently, Goleman and Boyatzis (2017) described a competency-based model of EI consisting of four overarching skill domains—self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management—within which fall twelve core competencies: emotional self-awareness, emotional self-control, adaptability, achievement orientation, positive outlook, empathy, organizational awareness, influence, coach and mentor, conflict management, teamwork, and inspirational leadership. To be highly emotionally intelligent, and thus be better suited for success, according to Goleman and Boyatzis (2017), one must possess a strong balance across all four domains. While certain competencies may come more naturally to some, EI is not fixed, so aptitude in the competencies can be developed over time to achieve greater balance.

## The Importance of Emotional Intelligence in Higher Education and Learning Assistance

Students enrolled in higher education are often navigating a unique chapter of life where they experience a plethora of emotions triggered by academics, extracurricular involvement, relationships, work, and family obligations, among others. Thus, it is crucial that students and those who interact with them have the emotional awareness and management skills to optimize their learning and overall success in higher education. Further, several studies found that college students with higher levels of EI attained higher academic performance in terms of GPA, test scores, learning outcome achievement, and/or satisfaction with the higher education experience (MacCann et al., 2020; Thomas et al., 2017; Zhoc et al., 2020).

### Corresponding Author

Jenna Guenther  
James Madison University, Learning Centers  
738 S. Mason St, MSC 1023 | Harrisonburg, VA 22807  
Email: [guenthjc@jmu.edu](mailto:guenthjc@jmu.edu)

Also, with recent emphasis on mental wellness on college campuses, EI is of utmost importance for students to employ productive coping mechanisms that support their academic learning. Student anxiety, such as test and math anxiety, are common challenges among college students that often impede learning. For instance, Thomas et al. (2017) indicated that students with test anxiety who lacked adequate emotion management and self-regulation strategies saw a decrease in their GPA throughout their college careers, and Haase et al. (2019) explained that the negative emotions students associate with math anxiety disrupt their processing skills, hinder working memory, reduce accuracy, and distract the learner's attention.

EI is beneficial to all stakeholders in higher education, but especially to those in learning support and assistance. Students seeking assistance may feel negative emotions toward their efficacy in a subject, or they may lack skills to productively cope with those emotions. Enhancing their EI could help them overcome their academic obstacles (Goleman, 1995, 1998; Goleman & Boyatzis, 2017; Goleman et al., 2013). High levels of EI are just as important for those who work with students seeking learning support, including peer educators and faculty/staff. People in these support positions need to understand the role emotions can play in their interactions with students so they can create a productive and supportive learning environment. For example, Devis-Rozental and Farquharson (2020) found that learning environments serving individuals and small groups that focused on fostering a safe and supportive atmosphere ultimately helped students both develop their EI and achieve academic goals. Similarly, Driscoll and Wells (2020) indicated a need in a university tutoring center environment for EI in both the tutor and the tutee for optimal learning to occur. They suggested incorporating EI into tutor training, integrating metacognition into tutoring interactions, and practicing mindfulness with tutors and tutees as potential practices to improve the EI of all parties. Thus, those in higher education learning assistance roles have a unique two-fold responsibility and opportunity to enhance their own EI to better serve students and to support the EI development of those students to foster a truly emotionally intelligent learning environment.

### Efforts to Cultivate an Emotionally Intelligent Learning Assistance Environment

Following the lead of Driscoll and Wells (2020), I have made intentional efforts to integrate EI into my

drop-in STEM peer tutoring program, focusing on tutor training and professional development procedures with the goal of advancing the EI of our tutoring staff. By enhancing their EI, they should be able to facilitate more effective learning interactions for students as well as help those students improve their EI. The following are specific practices aligned with five of Goleman's and Boyatzis' (2017) competencies I have employed to contribute to that goal. Efforts associated with the self-awareness and self-management domains of the framework fall under intrapersonal practices, whereas efforts corresponding to the social awareness and relationship management domains fall under interpersonal practices.

#### *Intrapersonal Practices*

Students enrolled in higher education are often navigating a unique chapter of life where they experience a plethora of emotions triggered by academics, extracurricular involvement, relationships, work, and family obligations, among others.

In order for my staff to appropriately understand and respond to the emotions of students in tutoring interactions, they need to possess sufficient awareness and management skills of their own emotions. To support my tutors in strengthening the *emotional self-awareness* competency, I begin each tutor training workshop with a reflection exercise to give active practice in identifying their recent emotions and the roots of those emotions. I review the importance of EI to their role, and then tutors and coordinators take a few quiet minutes to reflect on an emotional "check-in" question. The questions appear silly on the surface, but their lightheartedness is intentional to create an inviting space for emotion identification. Some example questions are: What color/pattern describes how you have been feeling lately and why? What ice cream flavor/product best captures your emotional state recently and why?

What is the weather report of how you have felt this week and why? Occasionally, I provide images and ask participants to reflect on which image resonates most with their emotions in that moment and why. To further bolster self-awareness, after our formal evaluation periods each semester, I have individual meetings with the tutors I supervise, and the first question I ask is how they have been feeling lately. Many tutors seem to be constantly on the go, so for the sake of EI, this basic question can be imperative to them slowing down to think about their emotions.

The drop-in STEM tutoring environment can often host periods of high stress and unpredictability, so the self-management competency of *emotional self-control* is crucial for tutors to facilitate a productive and supportive learning environment for students. In training workshops, I help the tutors grow in this competency by

designing activities in which they brainstorm strategies they can use to cope with emotions they may feel in certain tutoring situations, share and discuss concrete tips for working with students exhibiting various emotions, and reflect on past experiences where they recognize they could have responded differently.

While many of my tutors are seasoned goal setters and achievers in daily life, I strive to also support their *achievement orientation* competency specifically within the learning center. This begins with having clear expectations for tutoring excellence that are the foundation of the tutor training curriculum and evaluation protocol. This gives the tutors well-defined standards to meet and aspire toward as well as tools to help them get there. Other concrete practices to help tutors develop their achievement orientation are providing them with specific and actionable feedback in post-evaluation meetings, monitoring their growth across semesters, having them identify their strengths and weaknesses during training activities, and supporting them in setting goals for their tutoring and creating action plans.

### ***Interpersonal Practices***

Any tutoring environment is inherently social, so fostering an emotionally intelligent tutoring space requires keen social awareness and relationship management by the tutors. The *empathy* competency is arguably my primary EI focus in tutor training because recognizing and understanding the emotions of others, especially in a tutoring interaction, is complex but also vital to the efficacy of the interaction. One way I support the tutors' empathy development is through the emotional "check-in" question tasks described previously that I use to start training workshops. After internal reflection, participants share in small groups. This allows the tutors to consider the emotions of their peers, to acknowledge varying interpretations of emotions and associations, and to openly discuss emotions in a non-threatening way. The types of instructional activities I implement in training workshops are also geared toward exposing the tutors to perspectives outside of their own and putting themselves in others' shoes. For example, every workshop involves small group reflective discussion or think-pair-share, and I often incorporate role plays and simulations where the tutors experience a scenario from multiple perspectives and then discuss how each role made them feel, why, and how it connects to their interactions with students. In addition to the intentionality behind the structure of training activities, I select training topics that directly relate to empathy skills. For instance, empathy is reliant on effective communication skills, which is why I dedicate entire training sessions to active listening, nonverbal cues, communication styles and patterns, and constructive feedback. I also devote training sessions to topics like diversity and bias to broaden the tutors' lenses of the world so they might better under-

stand the experiences and backgrounds of students they interact with in tutoring.

The learning assistance environment is full of relationships including student-tutor, tutor-tutor, and coordinator-tutor, illustrating the importance of the relationship management domain. Specifically, to support tutors in developing the *coach and mentor* competency, I dedicate activities in training workshops to discuss the various interpretations of a tutor, one of which is a tutor as a coach. In these activities, we brainstorm and share strategies, behaviors, and ideas for working effectively with students, motivating them, and guiding them. As coordinators, we also support tutors' development in this competency by prioritizing our mentorship with them to model the necessary skills. For example, we provide ongoing feedback on their performance, treat them as whole people, and support them on the path to their goals so they can also experience the mentee side of this relationship.

### **Observations and Outcomes**

Emotional intelligence does not develop overnight, and it evolves with new experiences. After implementing these practices to support the tutors' EI development, such intelligence has become more evident in our learning assistance environment. For example, in the emotional "check-in" questions, with each workshop, I have observed deeper responses that demonstrate authentic reflection on their emotions, and in their discussions, the tutors now instinctively probe each other with follow-up questions that dig deeper into understanding the feelings of their peers. Another observation has been on non-training days when I overhear genuine conversations between tutors recycling "check-in" questions. Though this may seem minor, it suggests progression in both the self-awareness and social awareness domains of EI.

Beyond interactions between tutors, EI has become more apparent between the tutors and the students they assist since employing these efforts. I have witnessed more tutors implementing emotional self-control strategies during interactions, both for themselves and for tutees. For example, I recently observed an interaction involving an overwhelmed student, and the tutor made a supportive suggestion that the student take a quick walk before continuing. A few tutors have also progressed in the achievement orientation competency by seeking out their coordinators for feedback to improve their performance outside of formal evaluation meetings!

In addition, the extensive efforts to support tutors' empathy skills seem fruitful. Both in and out of formal evaluations, I have observed several tutors effectively integrating strategies like active listening, paraphrasing, probing the student to explain their thoughts more, and responding appropriately to various nonverbal cues in their interactions with students,

which were all discussed in communication-focused training activities. Students who utilize our services have provided feedback that they feel supported and productive when working with the tutors. Hence, the tutors are intentional about seeking out and understanding students' perspectives which facilitates learning and personifies empathy and social awareness.

### Conclusion and Future Implications

Emotions are an organic facet of learning that cannot be overlooked, minimized, or removed. For students seeking learning assistance, emotions can open the brain for learning just as easily as they can shut it down. Thus, to fully support students, stakeholders across learning assistance and higher education must acknowledge this fact and make efforts to help students recognize and manage their emotions in learning experiences. Rising to this challenge first requires commitment to strengthening our own EI.

The aforementioned efforts and strategies were rooted in the domain-competency EI model of Goleman and Boyatzis (2017) and focused on enhancing the EI of tutors in a drop-in STEM tutoring environment. The hope is that implementing concrete practices to improve the EI of the tutors leads to a chain reaction in which the tutors can support EI improvement in the students they work with. EI has a place in any learning assistance environment, but different programs will find value in different competencies of the framework. My suggestion to those committed to fostering an emotionally intelligent environment is to identify which competencies are most crucial to your work and brainstorm concrete practices for supporting those areas.

Emotionally intelligent students will hopefully be able to transfer these skills to being emotionally intelligent humans. Therefore, EI does not have to wait to be addressed until students enroll in higher education. Goleman's and Boyatzis' (2017) model overlaps substantially with the framework of social and emotional learning (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, n.d.), which is becoming increasingly popular across education. This gives me hope that students of all ages and backgrounds will one day have the resources and guidance to build their EI throughout their educational journeys. Until then, the learning assistance field must play our part by integrating EI into our daily work. Additional formal research is also imperative to the dissemination of the importance of EI in higher education and learning assistance environments and the development of evidence-based strategies that support EI in such settings.

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