

# Social and Emotional Skills Predict Postsecondary Enrollment and Retention

Kate E. Walton, Jeff Allen, Maxwell J. Box, Jeremy Burrus, and Dana Murano

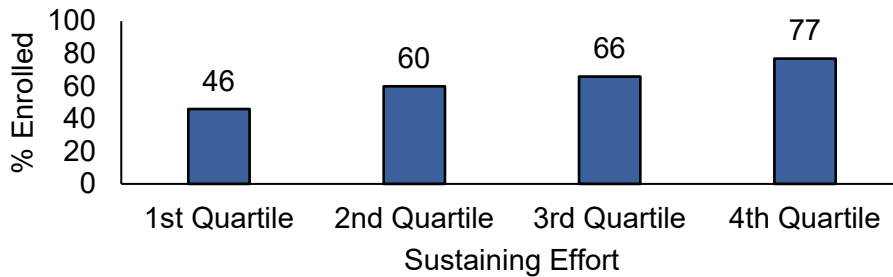
Social and emotional (SE) skills are known to be linked with many important life outcomes, including academic performance (Mammadov, 2021), performance on standardized college entrance exams (Anguiano-Carrasco et al., 2022), and college enrollment (Jackson et al., 2021). However, longitudinal research on postsecondary enrollment and retention is limited. In the current study, we evaluated whether the five SE skills measured with the Mosaic™ by ACT®: Social Emotional Learning Assessment (Sustaining Effort, Getting Along with Others, Maintaining Composure, Keeping an Open Mind, and Social Connection; ACT, 2021) predict postsecondary enrollment and retention above and beyond household income, high school grade point average (GPA), and Composite score on the ACT® test (see Walton et al., 2023, for the full-length report).

The following data points were available for 6,662 individuals: SE skill data collected in ninth through 12th grades, household income, high school GPA, ACT Composite score, and college enrollment status in the 2 years following high school graduation (enrolled 1 year after high school graduation, enrolled 2 years after high school graduation, and remained in college both Years 1 and 2). Analyses of data revealed the following key findings.

## Enrollment

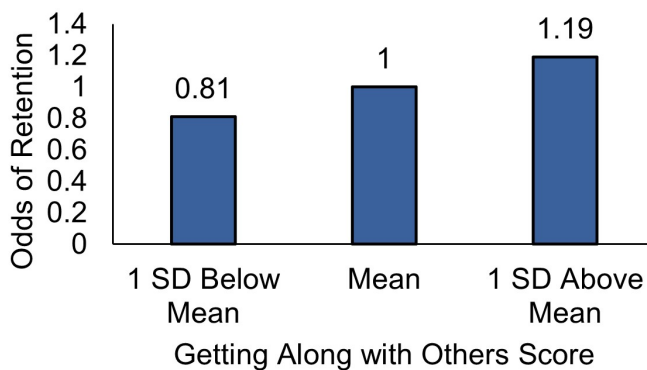
- Sustaining Effort and Getting Along with Others were significant predictors of Year 1 college enrollment, and Getting Along with Others and Keeping an Open Mind were significant predictors of Year 2 enrollment, even when we controlled for parental income, high school GPA, and ACT scores.
- Sustaining Effort was a stronger predictor of Year 1 enrollment than household income was.
- Getting Along with Others and Keeping an Open Mind were stronger predictors of Year 2 enrollment than household income was.

Figure 1 shows the percentage of students in each quartile of the Sustaining Effort skill who were enrolled 1 year after high school.

**Figure 1.** Student Year 1 College Enrollment Status by Sustaining Effort per Quartile

## Retention

- Getting Along with Others and Keeping an Open Mind were significant predictors of Year 1–Year 2 retention, even when we controlled for parental income, high school GPA, and ACT scores.
- Getting Along with Others and Keeping an Open Mind were stronger predictors of Year 1–Year 2 retention than household income was.
- When we controlled for household income, high school GPA, and ACT scores, an increase of 1 standard deviation in Getting Along with Others was associated with a 19% increase in the odds of retention from Year 1 to Year 2 (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2.** Odds of Retention by Getting Along with Others Score

## Conclusion

Given that higher levels of educational attainment are linked to greater chances of employment (Groot & van den Brink, 2007), higher earnings (Irwin et al., 2022), and better health (Furnée et al., 2008), it is critical to consider factors that influence students' educational paths, particularly those that are malleable, such as SE skills. This study provides evidence that SE skills measured in high school predict postsecondary enrollment and retention. Resources geared toward SE skill development can help educators prepare students for success in postsecondary education.

## References

- ACT. (2021). *Mosaic™ by ACT®: Social emotional learning assessment*.  
<https://www.act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/mosaic-sel-tech-manual.pdf>
- Anguiano-Carrasco, C., McVey, J., & Burrus, J. (2022). *Examining the relationship between social and emotional skills and ACT Composite scores*.  
<https://www.act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/2022/R2151-Social-and-Emotional-Skills-and-ACT-Composite-Scores-03-2022.pdf>
- Furnée, C. A., Groot, W., & van den Brink, H. M. (2008). The health effects of education: A meta-analysis. *European Journal of Public Health, 18*(4), 417–421.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/eurpub/ckn028>
- Groot, W., & van den Brink, H. M. (2007). The health effects of education. *Economics of Education Review, 26*(2), 186–200. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2005.09.002>
- Irwin, V., De La Rosa, J., Wang, K., Hein, S., Zhang, J., Burr, R., Roberts, A., Barmer, A., Bullock Mann, F., Dilig, R., & Parker, S. (2022). *Condition of education*. Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics.  
<https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2022144>
- Jackson, C. K., Porter, S. C., Easton, J. Q., Blanchard, A., & Kiguel, S. (2021). Linking social-emotional learning to long-term success. *Education Next, 21*(1), 64–71.  
<https://www.educationnext.org/linking-social-emotional-learning-long-term-success-student-survey-responses-effects-high-school/>
- Mammadov, S. (2021). Big Five personality traits and academic performance: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Personality, 90*(2), 222–255. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jopy.12663>
- Walton, K. E., Allen, J., Box, M. J., Murano, D., & Burrus, J. (2023). Social and emotional skills predict postsecondary enrollment and retention. *Journal of Intelligence, 11*(10), 186.  
<https://doi.org/10.3390/jintelligence11100186>



## ABOUT ACT

ACT is a mission-driven, nonprofit organization dedicated to helping people achieve education and workplace success. Grounded in more than 60 years of research, ACT is a trusted leader in college and career readiness solutions. Each year, ACT serves millions of students, job seekers, schools, government agencies, and employers in the U.S. and around the world with learning resources, assessments, research, and credentials designed to help them succeed from elementary school through career.

For more information, visit [act.org](https://act.org)