



Emotional intelligence: An admission criterion alternative to cumulative grade point averages for prelicensure students

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Accepted 31 March 2013

Keywords:
Emotional Intelligence
Admission criteria
Prelicensure students
Retention

SUMMARY

Background: Predicting potential student success is of great interest to nursing educators and academic administrators alike. Cumulative grade point average (CGPA) has traditionally been used to screen nursing program candidates, but CGPA itself has shown to have no statistically significant predictive value and may in fact screen out individuals who possess social intelligence attributes that are essential for success in nursing practice. The purpose of this study is to determine if students whose emotional intelligence characteristics meet or exceed those of successful staff nurses are more likely to be successful in a baccalaureate nursing program.

Methods: A descriptive, correlational design was used to compare the emotional intelligence attributes of 116 potential nursing students and 42 successful staff nurses using the Emotional Quotient Inventory (EQ-i).

Results: Nursing students who remained in the nursing program were found to have significantly higher levels of total emotional intelligence, interpersonal capacity, and stress tolerance. Students who dropped from the nursing program were not significantly different from successful staff nurses in terms of emotional intelligence.

Conclusion: Emotional intelligence presents a compelling adjunct to current selection criteria for nursing students. However, the lack of research prevents widespread adoption of this criterion. This study suggests that students with higher levels of emotional intelligence, particularly intrapersonal capacity and stress tolerance, are more likely to be successful in a baccalaureate nursing program than students with lower levels. Further research is needed to determine the usefulness of EI as a predictor of student success in nursing programs.

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Introduction

Grade point average (GPA) is widely used by academic organizations for predicting student success. The cumulative GPA is an average of grades obtained in coursework across all prior college and university experiences. Even though GPA does not take into account course rigor, relative content, outcomes, or consistency of application of grading, it has achieved an exalted status in the world of education and is the harbinger of all good and bad in students as part of the 'permanent record.'

Excess demand, retention, and student success are significant challenges for prelicensure nursing programs in the United States (U.S.). The *American Association of Colleges of Nursing (2012)* reports that over 75,000 qualified nursing students are denied admission to nursing school every year. The primary reasons cited for this pent up demand are limitations in clinical sites and insufficient supply of qualified nursing faculty. In addition to meeting the increasing demand for nursing students, nursing programs are challenged to

meet their evaluation criteria of student retention rates and first time pass rates on the national licensing exam, NCLEX-RN®. These outcome indicators drive schools to establish admission criteria. Historically, the use of cumulative GPA, completion of prerequisite courses, and scores on entrance exams has been the focus of admission criteria. However, emerging findings suggest that traditional strategies may not produce the expected results. Given the excessive supply of qualified students and the looming nursing shortage, successful retention of students in nursing programs is a critical need. Therefore, effective predictive strategies for student selection must be a serious consideration for all nursing schools. The purpose of this research study was to examine the use of emotional intelligence as a correlate to nursing student success in an effort to ultimately determine its usefulness as an admission criterion.

Review of Literature

Nursing School Admission Criteria in Practice

A variety of admission criteria are used in nursing schools across the U.S. today (*Schmidt and MacWilliams, 2011*). Since schools are evaluated by state boards of nursing on the percentage of students who pass the NCLEX the first time, pressure is increasing to develop admission criteria and rubrics to ensure greater nursing school

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retention, graduation and success on the licensing exam. Nursing schools are also concerned with increasing the diversity of nursing students and finding ways to evaluate nonacademic attributes consistent with success in nursing practice. In the late 1990s, NCLEX pass rates began a dramatic decline and graduation rates for nursing programs also began to slump below 85% (Sayles et al., 2003). This confluence of events created a focus and new research about admission practices and long standing admission criteria.

In a recent systematic review, Schmidt and MacWilliams (2011) analyzed fifty studies related to admission criteria for baccalaureate nursing programs. Seven distinct criteria were analyzed for efficacy: 1) cumulative grade point average (CGPA), 2) nursing prerequisite GPA, 3) achievement in individual science courses, 4) achievement in other courses, 5) preadmission standardized tests, 6) volunteerism and prior healthcare experience, and 7) admission and personal interviews. The authors found that CGPA was the most widely used admission criterion. However, they concluded that insufficient evidence exists to use GPA as a stand-alone admission criterion.

In addition to CGPA, Schmidt and MacWilliams (2011) also reviewed use of nursing prerequisites GPA as an admission metric. They concluded that a lack of consistency in prerequisite requirements precludes generalizations about prerequisite GPA efficacy. A statistically significant positive correlation between student success in pathophysiology and NCLEX success was found in one study, however, since pathophysiology is not typically taken prior to admission, this finding did not help inform admission decisions. Of the typical prerequisite sciences, Schmidt and MacWilliams found that microbiology and anatomy and physiology grades were strong predictors of program completion along with the number of times science courses were repeated. Furthermore, they found microbiology grades alone to be a strong predictor of graduation. Achievement in other non-science courses demonstrated no predictive value nor did prior healthcare experience. Finally, the authors concluded that standardized admission exams, used in combination with other criteria, prove useful in determining admission to nursing school.

Wolkowitz and Kelley (2010) conducted an extensive analysis of four areas of academic measurement to determine if any were predictive of student success in nursing school and ultimately the licensing exam. In this study, the authors sought to determine the usefulness of a standardized admission examination by comparing results of The Essential Academic Skills (TEAS) exam, which measures knowledge in the four categories of science, English, math and reading, with a nursing fundamentals exam evaluating performance in one of the first courses typically taken in a nursing program. The authors further explored whether one or more of the four academic areas – science, English, math or reading – were more or less predictive of student success in nursing school. This study confirmed that higher scores in science testing is a statistically significant predictor of success in nursing school and of the four content areas, the most predictive of success in early progress in nursing programs.

Competency-based Education

The challenge of using CGPA as an admission criterion is further exacerbated in a competency-based university environment such as the one in which the authors are employed. In a competency-based university, measurements of learning are not attached to time in class (credit hours) or grades but rather mastery of competencies as measured by assessments. While these measurement tools confirm mastery and allow for student progression, they do not result in a traditional grade. Assessments of competencies can be objective exams with cut scores set at the level of mastery (considered a “B” in a traditional academic model) or by papers or projects which are graded by a separate grading faculty using standardized rubrics.

For a university dedicated to serving adult students and focused on competency-based education, the use of CGPA as a measure of success

and as a criterion for admission presents a philosophical conflict. Thus the challenge of predicting student success for the purposes of admission into a competency-based prelicensure baccalaureate nursing program led to an investigation of admission criteria alternatives.

Emotional Intelligence: A Different Approach

The leadership literature is replete with references to emotional intelligence (EI) and its associated attributes as predictive of success in problem solving and decision-making as well as in overall personal success (Smith et al., 2009; Bar-On and Handley, 1999; Goleman, 1995; Mayer et al., 2004; Rader, 2010). EI is defined as “an array of emotional, personal, and social abilities and skills that influence one’s overall ability to succeed in coping with environmental demands and pressures” (Bar-On and Handley, 1999, p. 2). As with most instruments that measure personal attributes, the EQi represents a snapshot in time of a person’s skills, abilities, and attributes (Bar-On and Handley, 1999). Some EI researchers believe the EI personal skills and attributes are fixed and not modifiable (Mayer et al., 2004) while others contend that EI can be modified and enhanced over time (Bar-On and Handley, 1999).

In his groundbreaking 1995 book, *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More than IQ*, Daniel Goleman first posed using non-traditional intelligence measures that focus more on social intelligence to select individuals for various roles and positions, hypothesizing that the best success indicators were being overlooked. Similarly, as a caring profession, nursing has long recognized that successful nurses require certain affective dispositions to be successful in practice. In 1999, Bellack called for an assessment of EI competencies along with technical and cognitive competencies in students. A few years later, Freshwater and Stickley, 2004 asserted that nursing education focuses on the cognitive and psychomotor domains of learning without attention to the affective development of practitioners, thereby denying “the very heart of the art of nursing practice” (p. 93). They recommended integration of EI as the very core of nursing curricula Benson et al., 2010, in their study of EI in baccalaureate nursing students, acknowledge that EI is a prerequisite for “competent nursing practice” (p. 53). Similarly, Hurley (2008) noted that EI “relates directly to [the] very core of the therapeutic relationship and to the well-being of nurses burdened with emotional and intellectual challenges that characterize the profession” (p. 384).

As a result of the recognition of the centrality of EI to nursing practice, discussion of the use of EI as a selection tool for nursing programs emerged. For example, Cadman and Brewer (2001) posited that evaluation of EI in nursing school candidates may be a predictor of both clinical and academic successes. In addition, Hurley (2008) advocated for the use of EI as a student selection criterion. These discussions ultimately led to research. A study by Zysberg et al. (2011) in Israel evaluated the correlation of EI with nursing student performance. They found significant correlations between EI and clinical practice grades and interpersonal workshop grades, even when controlling for cognitive measures such as CGPA and psychometric testing.

Given the lack of evidence supporting CGPA and other admission criteria as indicators of success in nursing programs, and the call for an admission criterion that considers the affective dimensions of nursing, the authors embarked on a multistage study to develop an EI profile of successful staff nurses and to use that profile as a basis of comparison for nursing students. The authors posited that establishing an EI profile of successful staff nurses supported the identification of EI characteristics for successful nursing practice. The successful staff nurse was operationally defined for this study as working registered nurses, identified as a patient care expert by management on his/her clinical unit. Most were prepared at the baccalaureate level and had a minimum of two years clinical experience in their patient care role. The results of the first stage of this research are reported elsewhere (Harper and Jones-Schenk, 2012). The ultimate purpose of this descriptive, correlational study was to determine if student selection into a competency-based nursing program

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