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### The Perceived Influence of Non-Cognitive Skills on the Student Post-Secondary Journey

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## THE PERCEIVED INFLUENCE OF NON-COGNITIVE SKILLS

### Abstract

Learners typically enter higher education by meeting the academic threshold placed on them by their institution; however, their ability or inability to traverse the multi-interactive elements of post-secondary life are what underlie the premise of this research study. Over 320,000 students begin their post-secondary journey at a Canadian institution each year (Statistics Canada, 2019), and of those students, approximately 20-25% will withdraw before their second year (Grayson & Grayson, 2003). Of the students who choose to attend a community college in the Greater Toronto Area, 29-45% will never complete their program (Lopez-Rabson & McCloy, 2013). However, questions have been raised as to learner preparedness when entering higher education and whether today's learners possess the non-cognitive skill levels needed to handle their new learning environment and to adequately engage with the resources designed to support their transition, success, and retention (Adams, 2012; Savitz-Romer & Bouffard, 2012). As a result, this study explored the current level, value, and role of non-cognitive skills in today's college learners, along with the impact these skills have on their post-secondary journey. More specifically, the *how* and *what* stakeholders have experienced with non-cognitive skills were explored to understand its impact on student post-secondary experiences, academic and social development, engagement, and ultimately the decision-making process and ability to persist to graduation. Qualitative data were collected in the fall of 2019 at an Ontario community college located in the Greater Toronto Area. Semi-structured interviews were conducted using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis as the research method. In total, the lived experiences of nine college stakeholders consisting of three students, two staff members, two faculty members, and two administrators were analyzed and interpreted to gain the perspectives of those who occupy the Ontario college ecosystem. Although not generalizable, results showed that staff,

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faculty members, and administrators perceived non-cognitive skills to be lacking among today's college learners at a recognizable level. This, in turn, was said to contribute to student difficulties with juggling new responsibilities, coping with tragedies, forming new friendships and social circles, participating in academic and social activities, and making controlled decisions. These skill deficiencies were also found to contribute to students questioning their place within higher education and to situations where bumps along the college journey cannot be overcome. Student participants of this study held varying views regarding current skill levels. Student stories revealed perceptions of non-cognitive skill levels among the student population as *lacking*, *good*, and *unknown*. Nonetheless, non-cognitive skills were found to have a positive impact on a learner's post-secondary journey and all stakeholder groups identified a need for institutions to work toward developing these skills among their student population. Three recommendations were offered to build community awareness and create skill-development opportunities. The recommendations encouraged institutions to: 1) plan, integrate, and embed non-cognitive skills development in all facets of college life from student services to the classroom; 2) raise non-cognitive skills awareness and development through exposure and education; 3) provide upfront disclosure of the essential skills needed for program and student success.

*Keywords:* Colleges, Higher Education, Non-Cognitive Skills, Retention, Soft Skills, Student Success

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