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Emotion regulation and college persistence: A collaborative evaluation approach

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***Abstract*—** First-generation students face systemic and emotional barriers to persistence, yet most persistence models emphasize academic indicators and under-specify emotional competencies. This quantitative study examines whether emotion regulation (ER) predicts long-term college persistence among first-generation students in a federally funded programme. Grounded in Gross's process model of ER and evaluated using the Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS), this longitudinal collaborative evaluation followed 163 participants for six years post–high school to determine degree completion rates. Data were analyzed through logistic regression while incorporating a collaborative evaluation approach, guided by the Model for Collaborative Evaluations (MCE; Rodríguez-Campos & Rincones-Gómez, 2013). Results indicate that higher ER scores significantly increased the likelihood of college graduation, even after accounting for GPA and programme participation. These findings highlight the psychosocial value of ER and underscore the utility of collaborative evaluation models in identifying and acting on essential non-academic predictors of college persistence.

Keywords: Emotion regulation, collaborative evaluation, college persistence, first-generation students, psychosocial predictors, stakeholder involvement

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I. INTRODUCTION

FOR many first-generation students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, gaining college access represents only the beginning of a challenging journey. These students often face barriers such as limited economic resources and emotional stressors that impede persistence through higher education. While academic indicators such as GPA and test scores are traditionally used to forecast college success, a growing body of research has emphasized the crucial role of non-cognitive factors, particularly emotion regulation (ER), in shaping educational trajectories. ER, broadly defined as the ability to monitor, evaluate, and modify emotional responses, has gained attention for its association with mental health, academic motivation, and performance under stress (Gross, 2007; John & Gross, 2004).

This study investigates whether ER predicts college graduation over six years among students who participated in the federally funded XYZ programme. It moves beyond standard predictive models by examining psychosocial resilience factors collaboratively. We adopt a stakeholder-involvement approach using the Model for Collaborative Evaluations (MCE) to guide our evaluation process. The MCE offers a practical and philosophical foundation for working with students, educators, and administrators, centering mutual learning and shared decision-making (Rodríguez-Campos & Rincones-Gómez, 2013, 2018). By integrating ER theory with collaborative evaluation methodology, this study aims to advance understanding of how emotional competencies contribute to educational success and how evaluation can be reimagined as a co-owned developmental process.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Emotion regulation (ER), as conceptualized by Gross (2007), refers to a sequence of strategies individuals employ to influence the emotions they experience, when they experience them, and how they are expressed. Gross's process model outlines several points of intervention: situation selection, situation modification, attentional deployment, cognitive change, and response modulation. Cognitive reappraisal has consistently been linked to improved psychological functioning and academic engagement, while maladaptive strategies such as suppression have been associated with disengagement, emotional exhaustion, and decreased persistence (John, & Gross, 2004; Aldao et al., 2010).

The Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS) (Gratz & Roemer, 2004) operationalizes ER by assessing domains such as emotional clarity, goal-directed behaviour under distress, impulse control, and access to regulation strategies. Higher scores on the DERS indicate greater difficulties with ER, whereas lower scores suggest more adaptive functioning. In this study, we reverse-coded DERS scores to align interpretability with positive emotional functioning.

In parallel, the MCE (Rodríguez-Campos & Rincones-Gómez, 2013) provides a comprehensive structure for involving stakeholders in the evaluation process. The MCE comprises six interactive components: identify the situation, clarify the expectations, establish a collective commitment, ensure open communication, encourage effective practices, and follow specific guidelines. This approach was selected not only for its alignment with ethical evaluation principles but also because it enables evaluators and collaboration members (CMs) to co-construct meaning from data, including nuanced insights into emotional

development and resilience. These two frameworks support an integrated inquiry that bridges individual-level emotional competencies and systemic programmatic support.

III. METHODS

The present collaborative evaluation employed a longitudinal quantitative design to assess whether emotion regulation predicted college graduation among a cohort of first-generation students. Participants were drawn from a federally funded college preparation initiative for low-income high school students. United States. Department of Education guidelines defined eligibility based on first-generation college status, family income, and academic need.

A total of 163 students participated in the evaluation. Data was collected through programme records, standardized assessment tools, and follow-up reports over six years. The DERS assessed students' emotional competencies (Gratz & Roemer, 2004). The DERS is a validated 36-item instrument that measures six key dimensions of emotional functioning: nonacceptance of emotional responses, difficulties engaging in goal-directed behaviour, impulse control difficulties, lack of emotional awareness, limited access to emotion regulation strategies, and lack of emotional clarity. In interpretation, higher scores on the DERS reflect greater difficulties in emotion regulation. In our analysis, we reverse-coded DERS scores so that higher values represent stronger ER ability.

Academic achievement data included cumulative high school GPA, college enrollment, and graduation records. The outcome variable was binary, coded as 1 for students who graduated from college within six years and 0 for those who did not. Covariates included baseline GPA and participation intensity in the programme (measured by attendance and completion of academic milestones).

In alignment with the MCE, the team included programme staff as CMs throughout the evaluation. These CMs contributed to instrument selection, provided feedback on the interpretation of findings, and collaborated in developing actionable recommendations. Regular meetings and feedback loops were implemented to ensure mutual understanding and learning among evaluators and stakeholders. Data were analyzed using logistic regression to estimate the probability of college graduation as a function of emotion regulation, controlling GPA and programme participation.

All procedures were conducted in accordance with institutional ethical guidelines. Participants provided consent/assent for using their academic and survey data, and confidentiality was maintained throughout the evaluation process.

IV. RESULTS

Descriptive statistics were calculated for all key variables to understand the distribution and central tendencies within the sample. The mean score for emotion regulation was 3.45 (SD = 0.82), indicating moderate levels of self-regulatory capacity among participants. GPA ranged from 1.5 to 4.0, with a mean of 2.89 (SD = 0.51), and 62% of participants successfully graduated from college. These values are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of variables used in logistic regression

Variable	M	SD	Min	Max
Emotion Regulation	3.45	0.82	1.00	5.00
GPA	2.89	0.51	1.50	4.00
Programme Participation	0.73	0.44	0.00	1.00
College Graduation	0.62	0.49	0.00	1.00

Note. M = mean; SD = standard deviation

Pearson correlations were computed to assess the bivariate relationships among emotion regulation, GPA, programme participation, and college graduation. As shown in Table 2, emotion regulation was positively correlated with GPA ($r = .36$, $p < .001$) and with college graduation ($r = .29$, $p < .01$). Additionally, programme participation was moderately associated with both GPA ($r = .24$, $p < .01$) and graduation ($r = .19$, $p < .05$), suggesting that greater involvement in support programmes may contribute positively to academic success and degree attainment.

Table 2: Pearson Correlations Between Key Variables

Variables	1	2	3	4
1. Emotion Regulation	—			
2. GPA	.36***	—		
3. Programme Participation	.17*	.24**	—	
4. College Graduation	.29**	.42***	.19*	—

*Note. *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.*

A binary logistic regression was conducted to assess whether emotion regulation significantly predicted college graduation. The model included emotion regulation and GPA as predictors. As presented in Table 3, both predictors were statistically significant. Emotion regulation emerged as a significant predictor ($B = 0.52$, $OR = 1.68$, $p = .004$), suggesting that the odds of graduating increased by 68% for every one-unit increase in ER score. GPA was also a robust predictor ($B = 1.24$, $OR = 3.46$, $p < .001$), meaning students with higher academic performance were substantially more likely to complete college.

Table 3: Logistic Regression Predicting College Graduation Based on Emotion Regulation and GPA

Predictors	B	SE	Wald	OR	95% CI for OR	*p*
Emotion Regulation	0.52	0.18	8.37	1.68	[1.18, 2.40]	.004 **
GPA	1.24	0.32	15.09	3.46	[1.84, 6.52]	<.001 ***
Constant	-2.15	0.65	10.95	0.12		.001 **

*Note. OR = odds ratio; CI = confidence interval. **p < .01, ***p < .001.*

The overall model was statistically significant, $\chi^2(2) = 28.64$, $p < .001$, and explained approximately 31.4% (Nagelkerke R^2) of the variance in graduation outcomes. These results underscore the importance of integrating emotion regulation as part of college persistence frameworks, alongside traditional academic metrics.

V. DISCUSSION

This study contributes to a growing body of research emphasizing the role of ER as a significant non-cognitive factor in predicting academic success among first-generation, low-income college students. By examining longitudinal data from a sample of students engaged in the XYZ college-preparation programme, we found that ER significantly predicted college graduation, even when controlling GPA and programme participation. These findings suggest that students who can better manage their emotional responses are more likely to persist through higher education and attain a degree.

In line with Gross's (2007) theoretical model, our results underscore the utility of cognitive reappraisal and related ER strategies in supporting adaptive behaviours that enhance persistence. ER may buffer students against the psychological stress associated with academic and social transitions, especially among first-generation students who often encounter systemic barriers and limited familial support for navigating higher education (Stephens et al., 2012). These students frequently experience unique emotional burdens, including impostor syndrome, cultural mismatch, and financial anxiety (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015). Strengthening ER skills may help students remain engaged in their academic trajectory despite these challenges.

The predictive value of GPA also reinforces the long-established link between prior academic performance and educational attainment. However, the independent contribution of ER demonstrates that success is not determined by academic indicators alone. As prior research has shown, ER supports students in sustaining motivation, reducing avoidance behaviours, and maintaining mental health during critical decision-making moments across their academic journey (Troy et al., 2010). Thus, college success initiatives should consider implementing interventions that cultivate ER alongside tutoring or mentoring programmes.

These findings also validate the relevance of the MCE as a framework for conducting evaluations with meaningful stakeholder involvement.

By integrating programme staff as CMs, the evaluation process fostered shared data ownership, collaborative sensemaking, and real-time adaptation to findings. The MCE's six components supported methodological rigor and ethical engagement with the community under study (Rodríguez-Campos & Rincones-Gómez, 2018).

The collaborative nature of this evaluation helped uncover the nuanced roles of affective skills in student persistence. These insights may be more challenging to have emerged through a more traditional, top-down evaluation model. These results strengthen the argument that evaluations conducted in partnerships with educators, counselors, and students can generate more contextually relevant findings and inform actionable recommendations grounded in stakeholders lived realities.

This study supports the call for comprehensive, student-centered frameworks in college persistence research. It highlights the need to shift institutional conversations toward psychosocial dimensions that influence academic performance and retention. Programmes serving underrepresented students should systematically assess and foster emotional competencies through culturally responsive curricula, mindfulness-based training, and reflective group discussions.

In future evaluations, it may be valuable to explore whether the predictive strength of ER differs across demographic subgroups, including gender or first-language status. Examining whether targeted ER interventions during high school or early college improve persistence outcomes could guide scalable policy solutions. Incorporating qualitative methods, such as interviews or focus groups, may also enrich our understanding of how students experience and develop emotional coping mechanisms over time.

These findings suggest practical implications for federally funded college-access programmes such as TRIO. Embedding structured ER skill-building activities such as mindfulness, stress-management, and cognitive reappraisal training into programme curricula may strengthen persistence outcomes.

The study affirms the role of ER in educational attainment while demonstrating the value of collaborative evaluation methods. It advances a model that centers on methodological integrity and the empowerment of communities that have the most impact on the development of the communities. As institutions seek to improve graduation rates among first-generation college students, integrating ER into practice and evaluation represents a promising policy and programme design direction.

VI. CONCLUSION

This collaborative effort examined the predictive role of ER in college graduation outcomes among first-generation, low-income students for the XYZ programme. The findings confirmed that ER significantly contributes to students' academic persistence, even after accounting for traditional predictors such as GPA and programme participation. By drawing on Gross's theoretical framework and embedding the process in a collaborative evaluation structure, we offered a dual lens that considers individual emotional development and systemic programme design. Applying the Model for Collaborative Evaluations (MCE) enriched the evaluation by involving key stakeholders as CMs, fostering shared learning, and reinforcing that evaluations must be co-owned to be meaningful and actionable. These collaborative insights were instrumental in refining our interpretation of quantitative findings and generating practical recommendations for supporting college persistence. As educational institutions continue to address gaps in higher education, this study demonstrates the relevance of integrating psychosocial variables into programme evaluation and student success interventions. Emotion regulation emerges not merely as a predictor of graduation but as a capacity that can be cultivated through intentional and responsive programming.

It is essential to consider in the future longitudinal designs that integrate qualitative methods to capture the lived experiences of students navigating emotional challenges in academic settings. Additionally, scaling ER-focused interventions, particularly within college access and readiness programmes, could have transformative effects on graduation outcomes. These findings support a paradigm shift in how student success is defined and pursued, one that recognizes emotional intelligence as central to academic resilience and values collaborative approaches in evaluation and policy development. By equipping students with the emotional tools to thrive and by engaging stakeholders in reflective evaluation practices, we contribute to a more effective higher education landscape.

VII. CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There are no conflicts of interest in this article.

VIII. DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data are available upon request.

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