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Why Personality Is A Better Predictor Of Success Than Intelligence



By Carolyn Gregoire



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When it comes to academic achievement, intelligence is an important factor — but not the only, or even the most important, factor.

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According to a new Australian study, *personality* is a better predictor of success in school than intelligence as measured by traditional standardized tests. Specifically, students who were more open and conscientious performed better academically than those who were merely intelligent.

Australian researchers compared measurements of the “Big Five” personality traits — extraversion, neuroticism, agreeableness, conscientiousness and openness to experience — to college students’ grades and test scores. They asked students to complete personality self-assessments, and also asked others who knew the students well to complete assessments of them. They found that the students’ self-assessments were as effective as intelligence in

predicting academic performance, and that the reports from those who knew them well were nearly *four times more accurate* in predicting academic performance than intelligence.

The researchers found that openness and conscientiousness factors exerted the largest influence on academic success, in accordance with previous research which has linked these two traits with various types of achievement. Studies have shown openness to experience — which has to do with intellectual curiosity, and how excited we get to acquire new information — to be the number-one predictor of creative achievement. Conscientiousness, on the other hand, is the only one of the Big Five traits that is consistently predicts success.

“In practical terms, the amount of effort students are prepared to put in, and where that effort is focused, is at least as important as whether the students are smart,” the study’s lead author, Dr. Arthur Poropat of Griffith University’s School of Applied Psychology, said in a statement. “And a student with the most helpful personality will score a full grade higher than an average student in this regard.”

The findings come as an important reminder that children who may not be considered “smart” by traditional measures may still become highly successful, both by traditional measures and in their own right. And since personality may be more malleable than intellectual capability, helping struggling students to cultivate beneficial personality traits — particularly intellectual curiosity and a strong work ethic — may be a powerful means of improving academic performance. Fortunately, high-IQ students who struggle more with attitude and social skills can also learn to cultivate these qualities.

“Personality does change, and some educators have trained aspects of students’ conscientiousness and openness, leading to greater learning capacity,” Poropat said in the statement. “By contrast, there is little evidence that intelligence can be ‘taught,’ despite the popularity of brain-training apps.”

The research was published in the journal *Learning and Individual Differences*.

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