Whatever the decision—to choose a postsecondary school, or land a job, or immigrate to a new country—social scientists have discovered that more emotion than logic can factor into decisions and actions such as these. But what about emotional intelligence, the capacity to recognize and monitor your own and others’ emotions in order to guide your thinking and actions? Theoretically, a potential student, a job seeker, or an immigrant can enhance the ability to “think emotionally” before acting.

Researchers Johanne Clare, a Professor in George Brown’s Centre for Community & Social Services, and Maureen Hynes, Coordinator of the School of Labour and their team have set out to understand if emotional intelligence, or EI, grows in relation to educational practices. The other team members are Georgia Quartaro, Dean of General Education and Access; and Rose-Marie Nigli, Counsellor in Student Affairs.

The team is studying two cohorts of full-time students, a total of 156, in the 2006 and 2007 entering years of the centre’s Community Worker (CW) diploma program. Results and analysis are expected in spring, 2008.

CW graduates work as counselors for people in difficult life circumstances and as advocates and organizers on social issues of injustice, discrimination and poverty. So the question of whether the students’ own ability to empathize, problem-solve, tolerate stress or control impulses expands during their studies is important, for them and their eventual clients. These emotional skills, among others, are all components of EI.

“Along with developing knowledge and academic skills,” says Clare, “the Community Worker program is meant to develop many components that are understood to be part of EI!” She adds, “Even though students may come into the program with a certain degree of EI skills already, we are interested to see if those baseline skills will increase.” One outcome of the research may be to make changes in the CW program, if changes are warranted by the data.

EI has captured popular interest through the 1990s onward. Yet one of the scholars in EI research, Dr. Reuven BarOn, has been considering EI for more than 20 years. Social scientists worldwide use his test, the BarOn Emotional Quotient Inventory (EQ-i), extensively, as are Clare and the research team.

Their project asks the CW students to respond to the BarOn series of 133 question items early on in their first semester. The items are meant to elicit a number of EI skills and yield an overall EI “report.” In their last semester of the CW program, the same students will do a post-test. The comparative group average and comparative individual student results, pre- and post-test, will be shared with the group and each student, respectively. A subset of students will then be interviewed one-on-one to discover whether the BarOn EQ-i and their EI scores accurately reflect their emotional intelligence, and whether aspects of the CW program have contributed to EI for them and from their teachers’ point of view.

“Most of the data so far,” says Hynes, “consider how EI might improve academic performance. But we are looking at EI as the goal, not the means to a goal, and education as perhaps aiding the goal.” Their team is at the crest of a wave: research into the noncognitive benefits of postsecondary education has only begun to emerge over the past few years.

The team also wants to expand the understanding of EI among a more diverse population that is somewhat older and at the same stage of education (full-time study). This is the profile of many CW students. EI education studies to date have tended to focus on a younger, more homogeneous student group and have mixed part-time and full-time students.

Adds Clare, “We already know that every person gains in EI as a result of the natural maturation process. We hope that in studying what EI older students, and within the relatively narrow timeframe of a two-year program, we can discount the maturity factor to a larger extent and look more specifically at CW program effects on students’ EI.”

The researchers also see EI as relevant research for lay communities. EI is “out there,” in many employers’ minds in hiring and promotion decisions.

At a time when applied research at Ontario community colleges is increasingly focused on making a contribution to knowledge, and increasingly eligible for funding, the CW-EI research project may signal George Brown’s strength in the social sciences, and productive future research.