The Gulf Between Two Cultures:
Underachieving Students Versus the College

A Student Life History Project on the
Educational Culture of Underachieving Cegep Students

Jock Mackay, Doug Miller and Guy Quinn
Researchers

Cégep Vanier College

This document is a brief summary of the report entitled
Complicated Lives:
The Educational Culture of the Lower Achieving Student

Key Factoid

In the autumn semester of 2005 at Vanier College, there were 962 students who failed to meet the minimum requirements to remain in college as students in good standing. These 'Review Boards' represented about 17% of the full-time student population. Neither the college employees nor the nearly 1000 students who go through this process feel rewarded or validated when failure meets failure and the essential institutional response is to 'carry on.' For the most part, the students are re-admitted and receive no other follow-up or support. This is simply the most recent evidence that on both sides of the institutional / student gulf there is a crisis of under-performance in Cegep, especially in the students' first year.

The Problem

This research project grew out of our experience working at Vanier College, particularly with students whose academic record rendered them 'at-risk' upon arrival at Cegep. We have each devoted our best energies over the past ten years to working with weaker, incoming students during their first semester in the Explorations program, a *session d'accueil* or 'welcoming semester' whose purpose is to ease the transition from high school to a college program of study.

A group of us who had worked in Explorations began to examine ways of deepening our impact. We were reading about underachieving students and examining patterns of success, failure and dropout at Vanier College. We investigated the techniques of experiential education and made some brave forays into pedagogical experimentation.
All this while, we also observed, as did many of our colleagues, that the needs of many students were changing dramatically while we delivered special programs to only a minority of incoming students. Many teachers reported that students were simply not ready for the courses which had traditionally been taught at the college. The level of academic skill, including basic literacy and numeracy, appeared to have declined. Study skills, ability with texts, conceptual adeptness, logical capabilities, and capacity to follow and understand assignment instructions and the content of lectures, had all appeared to decline. In addition, student commitment to their studies and to the educational process as a whole appeared to have vaporized for many. Classroom behaviour and discipline began to become the topic of cafeteria chatter among teachers and the subject of workshops at the college. Something was happening here, and we didn't know what it was.

It had become clear that many students arrive at college with a different educational culture than that which had been taken for granted by teachers and other college personnel a generation earlier. The formal contours of the student population, such as mother tongue, age, and 'feeder' high school, were well documented, as were patterns of performance such as grades, pass rates, and graduation rates. But those who worked with students continued to throw up their hands, asking: "What can they be thinking? Why do they act like this? What do they think they are doing? What can be going on in their heads?" Many students no longer seemed to share a cultural universe with teachers and staff when it came to the educational process (Péloquin and Baril, 2002). In the course of our research we have come to understand that this is a societal issue which is drawing the attention of educators throughout North America, and even abroad.

Existing studies have explored gender (Davis & Nemiroff, 1993; Davis & Steiger, 1996), ethnicity (Bertrand, 1994; Potvin, 1999 & 2000), and socioeconomic factors (Curtis, Livingstone & Smaller,1992) contributing to the poor educational performance of the students in the bottom quintile. Concerned especially with high dropout and low graduation rates, the Quebec Ministry of Education has sponsored studies which focus on the key variables which are correlated with at-risk status (Terril, Ducharme et Plante, 1994). Working class boys, in particular, often

score low marks throughout their educational career, are prone to dropping out of school prematurely, and are more resistant to the traditional approaches for integrating students into the educational system. Girls more often seem to be prepared to accept the norms of the institutional process and work to succeed within the system (Badoux et Noircent, 1998; Bouchard et al., 1994 & 1996; Coulombe, 1993; Crépeau & Gagnon, 1997; Lamarre et Ouellet, 1999). There is a considerable body of such literature on elements associated with low academic performance, some of it trailing off to psychological reductionism, such as has happened with the now controversial assumptions about the role of self-esteem in academic success (Baumeister et al., 2005).

> Schooling is folded into a structural envelope composed of a network of obligations and meanings which are intricately tied to the students' most profound relationships.

But the social context for educational success is much broader than a list of independent variables. Schooling is folded into a structural envelope composed of a network of obligations and meanings which are intricately tied to the students' most profound relationships. Such relationships condition the student's educational experience at every juncture, exhibiting a form of historicity in the interface with educational institutions which Pierre Bourdieu (1990) refers to as *habitas,* i.e. the individual's embodied history being reflected as second nature, representing the active presence of the individual's cultural ancestry, a kind of whole collective past exercised in individual praxis. Students incorporate the experience of their family, their class position in the societal economy and the 'flow' of their peer group into a kind of embryonic consciousness which informs their tentative strategy toward adult status, for which higher education is only one marker. These three arenas are more than landscape: the students' family, work world and peer reference group comprise the key experiential touchstones of their lives.

 A student's family of origin is more than just that. As primary crucible of identity, a student's family speaks to each of them daily in both word and in unspoken expectations. In their study of immigrant identity and college learning strategies, Lapierre and Loslier (2003) found that the sons and daughters of immigrant families which have recently arrived in Quebec adopt a posture toward their studies which effectively commits them to being an 'emissary' for the family and its success in the 'new world'. For them the 'family project' is a key element of their *habitas*. The student has incorporated the family's mobility strategy into his or her daily practice, envisioning individual and family futures as one. The Lapierre/Loslier model posits that these new immigrants are committed to acquiring an education as part of the neoQuebecois family project of getting established and building a better life; education is a means toward the end of economic mobility for the group.

By contrast with such recent immigrant families, those students who are 'second generation immigrants' have typically detached from the 'family project' and, in a mould defined by Quebecois youth, see education as self-actualization. These young Quebecois are individualistic in their educational orientation and hedonistic in their personal priorities. Their families typically support them, according to their means, but the educational experience for them must be intrinsically rewarding and they choose a future according to a personal agenda. These latter two groups (second generation immigrants and native Quebecois) view education as one avenue of self-fulfillment and commit to it only insofar as they enjoy it and see in their continued study something of value for their personal growth.

Engagement in the larger economy by working for pay typically begins in high school for these young adults. Jacques Roy (2005, 2006) approaches the perspective of Cegep youth using a model of "ecologie sociale". Family, social life, work, college, and the rest of the panoply of involvements that engage today's student must be viewed as a whole, and in that context the commitment to education is only one among many competing for a student's time. Roy notes that a large

majority of students now work in paid employment (almost four times as frequently as a generation ago) and that this is an inescapable condition of their existence. In addition, paid work is a necessity often misunderstood or belittled by adult society, which tends to view the commitment to paid employment as little more than a desire for 'mad' money for cars, clubbing or stylish clothes, while students are supposed to be focused on getting an education. Drawn from a study of the values of cegepiens based on a large sample of students from three colleges, Roy and his colleagues find that most students are not driven to work through absolute financial necessity but rather through what might be called social necessity, i.e. working enables these young adults to occupy their integral place in society and enjoy culturally appropriate levels of personal autonomy, even when they live at home with financially comfortable parents. Not only is it naïve for educators to try to 'will' this phenomenon away, but to act as though working is not necessary for these students undermines their performance and contributes to their stress.

More forceful even than family or work on the world view of underachieving Cegep youth is their peer group. Educational psychologist Gordon Neufeld (2005) claims that peers are not only primary socializers during the formative teen years, but are also becoming key sources of knowledge and wisdom, such as it is, effectively replacing adult figures, and this for the first time in history. According to Neufeld, information and influence now flow horizontally instead of vertically and teens are "being brought up by each other." He reminds us that students learn and develop better when the learning environment is not simply a shared space in which students and teachers arrive according to a schedule, and interact through the vehicle of a pre-defined curriculum. According to Neufeld, the learning environment needs to feel 'natural' and the interaction needs "to weave together what the teacher is offering and what the child requires." The fabric of their connection must have a positive affective element which generates a "sense of attachment" . Further, Neufeld contends, those youth who are

trapped in their "stuckness," who don't know where to begin toward a path of accomplishment, will, in the absence of reliable, trustworthy and communicative teachers and elders, rely on their peers to fill the gap. Peer relations are central for those who are growing beyond their families yet are not particularly attached to school (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Neufeld, 2005; Pomeroy, 2000).

This cultural landscape is the context for today's Cegep students. Institutional responses to their needs have been limited and sporadic rather than systematic. Tinto (1996, 2002) claims that we who work in education have not really taken the issue of student retention seriously, but rather have simply tinkered at the edges. He maintains that institutions have taken a half-hearted 'shotgun' approach of 'adding-on' but, "They have done little to change the way they organize their activities, done little to alter student experience, and therefore done little to address the deeper roots of student attrition" (Tinto, 2002, p.1). He goes on to maintain that the research has been done, and we know what works, but we are reluctant to change. We persist in treating the students like empty vessels into which we pour knowledge in lavish quantities, using what Freire called the 'banking model of education.' From Dewey (1938) through Freire (1970) and within what is now called the constructivist paradigm, the pedagogical strategy that works with the widest population of learners begins from the lived experience of students, is deeply social in its process, and requires a combination of action and reflection. Tinto's suggestion of 'learning communities' provides settings where individuals in groups learn together in familiar and supportive environments. The frequency and quality of contact among staff, faculty and students, both inside and outside of the classroom, involves everyone in the process. He echoes our contention that building this environment, especially in the first year of college, is critical for bringing about long term educational success.

We estimate that at least the bottom quintile needs extra orientation to college studies. Recent figures on student failures in the

college, especially in first semester, confirm that, in fact, the entire bottom fifth is severely 'at risk' of failing their college semester. We decided to take a direct approach to the issue and ask these students what they had to say about it all. We knew that the study had to be as non-intrusive as possible, yet we needed to have the students' view of their experience stated in their own words as well as through the lens of their own world view.

The Study

Educational knowledge and research is largely a paper trail of numbers. Beginning with a student's attendance records, final grades, grade point averages and R-scores for individual performance, pass rates and class averages for courses and programs, statistics derived from OPSCAN respondent sheets for course evaluations (and occasionally for opinions), success rates and key performance indicators for programs and institutions, and continuing through pages of tables for program evaluation, the educational realm is one in which 'objective' data holds such a privileged place as a basis for the direction of institutional resources that it might seem to a casual observer that there could be no other. But as a secondary school student explained to La Presse reporter Marie Allard: "*Entrer en relation avec les jeunes, c'est long et ardu, il faut arrêter de faire rentrer ça dans des colonnes comptables alors que ça n'a rien à voir*". Indeed, the challenge of youth can never be resolved with columns and figures.

This study examines the educational experience of at-risk students as they arrive at Cegep and presents a portrait of their educational culture. The findings are based on five sources of primary data: open-ended interviews conducted over a three year period beginning in 2002 with a sample of 48 underachieving college students selected from the bottom quintile, an ethnographic report from two feeder high schools, four focus groups with scholarship students, a focus group with three non-teaching college professionals, and interviews with fourteen teachers.

The secondary source of data is the academic records of the bottom quintile for the A02 cohort and for what we have come to call the Sample48. Information has also been gleaned from personal visits to and/or extensive investigation of seven secondary schools, colleges or universities with special programs for underachieving students.

The study is primarily qualitative and longitudinal, evoking from approximately 2500 pages of transcript a narrative of the transition from high school to college, expressing the point of view of students who were 'just scraping by'. We present this narrative in their own words through a network of meaning which is derived directly from the students' stories as told to us. Their story is augmented by our commentary on the 'fit' between student desires and expectations on the one hand and institutional responses on the other. The model of the interface between these two patterns, what we have called 'the gulf' between students' needs and institutional offerings, revolves around the notion of the 'readiness factor', i.e. an account of key elements in a student's approach which indicate whether he or she is likely to continue and to succeed in college studies. Based on a perusal of existing transition programs, suggestions are made about programmatic strategies in colleges which might respond more directly to the expressed needs of at-risk students.

> "I always wanted to be somebody, but now I realize I should have been more specific."
> - Lily Tomlin

The Educational Culture of the Bottom Quintile

Students in the two high schools studied in 2004 showed an intense attachment to social life with peers at school and little interest in academic subjects. Asked what they looked forward to in a day at school, most of the students shared this opinion.

Friends, socializing. Some teachers, only the classes I liked. I looked forward to going to those classes. Basically I think it was the

social part of high school. That's what really kept me such a long time in high school. Like the social part - socializing, friends, groups, all the stuff I was involved with.

The over-riding element of their daily life at school was stress, derived from the social pressure of peers, the demands of school discipline and performance, as well as from the threat of imminent expectations from the next step in their 'academic careers' - Cegep. Daily life in high school was primarily characterized by their ambiguous status as adolescents, caught in a pressurized nexus between childish ways and adult responsibilities.

Some of the students can't really take it, take all this pressure. Even sometimes people are suicidal. I remember like one time my friends and I were talking, right? It was a discussion one time. The teacher actually asked us what makes us think about suicide. Most of us said it was stress, being bullied, many things. 'Cause I'm seein' right now, some of those students, you don't know what to expect from them.

The Sample48, who had graduated from high school with grade averages under 70%, also report that their high school day was driven by social life with their peers. When asked what they liked about school, the answer was often a somewhat skewed version of what school involved.

Lunch time…. Phys. Ed., ...lunch… But, just 'cause we got to hang out and not do any school work, that's all.

Many had developed coping mechanisms which had sufficiently served them that they passed through high school without incident, despite very little stated interest in the subject matter. They had performed 'efficiently' by engaging the school system at a minimal level, just enough to continue their studies.

…When I hear people saying I have two hours of homework to do when they're in high school at night, I couldn't believe it. I went to one of the hardest schools that I heard of in Montreal, after Brebeuf, I heard. So they said: "I have

two hours of homework at night." I said: "it's impossible." If I did my half-hour, which I didn't even do at night, if I did my half hour every night, I would have had 80s easily in school.

A significant minority, however, had lost interest in school at one point and made some serious adjustments, such as attending an adult centre or alternative high school in order to complete their Secondary V. Many had been buffeted around through several schools, and languages, on their way toward a high school diploma. Most were not active in extra-curricular activities, but were deeply tied to their families. Most had rewarding positive relationships with only one or two of their teachers, those who took a personal interest in them. These students liked the teachers who respected them and focused on individual needs yet taught to the whole class, and were confident in their subject matter. Several described chaotic high school classes in which teachers addressed a receptive audience of good students at the front of the room, while the bottom quintile, or more, languished in the back, ignored and 'goofing off'.

For these under-achieving students, almost to a person, school is primarily social life. In both high school and Cegep they went to school to see their friends. They usually claim to be highly committed to their families, and are sometimes attending college due to parental pressure, yet are withdrawing from the more quirky or oppressive demands which their families sometimes impose. Many of their families are also challenged, troubled or divided, complicating the students' 'rite of passage' toward adulthood.

Most of these students have studied in more than one language and many have grown up in immigrant families. They are often 'first generation students,' i.e. have become more educated than their parents by coming to college, yet are often ambivalent about the 'family project.' Some have encountered exclusion, marginalization or racism, and several have lived in serious poverty most of their lives.

What motivates me to get up and go to school is the fact that, you know what, I might actually be somebody when I grow up, that's what motivates me. Like I don't owe it to the work, I owe it to myself. I owe it to the people that brought me up. I owe it to the people that pay my school fee. I owe it to the woman that makes my lunch every morning. I owe it to the sister that buys me whatever it is I want for Christmas and my brother that always protects me and my dad that always gives me lunch money. I owe it to those people to come to school. I owe it to those two 50 year old parents that I have that came off of another country to an unknown other country with one suitcase, a job that, you know, they like doing now, but they had to start off with not liking. I owe it to them to come to school every day.

Most of the young men of Haitian extraction had faced the additional hurdle of racism in many forms.

The first detention, the principal can like look at you, read your name, look at you, like to get a feeling like, okay this guy, this name, sometimes maybe the colour… Maybe 'cause every time the principal is always on your back. Everywhere you're walking in the school, he's following you. Or let's say you're with a group of friends, he's following you, or us and always doing warning for nothing …. "You're not allowed to hang out here." Yeah, but it's our school. Like the [white] *kids that are all hanging out, why don't you go tell them to not hang out? "I got authority, you have to respect me." That's the thing that we didn't like… Maybe one incident happened… we didn't hang like all black, but… Sometimes we were friends with other people and they warned the people, if you go with them, you're going to be in trouble, too…*

The vast majority of the students in our sample are active in the paid work-force. Some effectively hold full-time jobs, working 25 or more hours per week, while they are full-time students. The types of work vary immensely, from telemarketer and clothing store salesperson to swimming pool lifeguard, professional musician and movie theatre manager. These students are usually living the full social and economic lives of young adults. They are straining toward independence while still enjoying many privileges, but also some stigmas, of youth. They want to validate their place in society by attaining post-secondary diplomas and degrees, but are only rarely motivated by the subject matter of courses. Not surprisingly, they sometimes come up against a personal 'wall' of dissipation and indifference about their studies.

So you don't have any, like motivation or anything, so you start having friends, and maybe you don't feel like doing homework or anything like that… more distractions. And it just starts there. It's not bad, it just starts there. And grades go down maybe a little and then Grade 10, it's just downhill from there. And distractions really start there and Grade 11, really the grades went down dramatically, where I don't know. Just a lot of distractions and then you start going out at night and I played hockey. And you, then you need money, so you start to work. So you want to keep school a priority. It still is a priority, but there's other priorities too.

When they encounter this 'wall', they either find it difficult to resurrect any commitment to school, or occasionally encounter an epiphany which turns them around toward a pattern of accomplishment. But such students often have a poor estimation of their own academic capabilities and frequently do not understand the criteria of college grading schemes and therefore are often only dimly aware of their standing in a course. They do not respond well to many traditional forms of classroom teaching, are often resentful of content-based courses, and insist that what they learn be relevant to their lives in ways which they can immediately comprehend. Many of these students are simply not ready to fulfill the requirements of the program in which they are enrolled at college. Some of them give up quickly, failing in their first semester and discontinuing their studies. Others persist almost beyond comprehension, singularly devoted to a dream of their future, even though they might be well into their twenties before they complete a Cegep program.

…'cause I wanted to be someone, I wanted to have a good education and get a good job. It's not because I really like, it's not because I enjoy school, it's because if you don't go to school, you won't get an education. That's really the main goal.
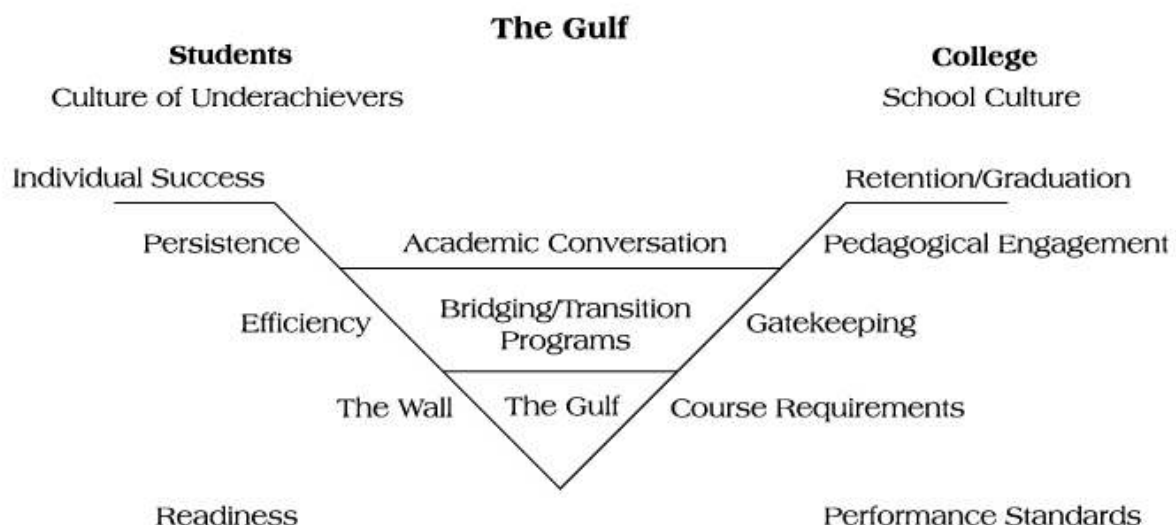
Readiness Factor

These students have just arrived at Cegep and they will have to make do with the 'baggage' they have brought or else pick up the skills and attitudes which they do not have while at college. The less they arrive with, the less capable, or ready they will be for the tasks ahead. Every student has a different combination of attributes which contribute to an individual readiness factor and depending on what those are, his or her chances of success would also differ. The sooner they acquire those missing elements, the more quickly will their chances improve of surviving in this 'new world'. We watched students acquire these missing attributes and make the required changes to their profiles in order to accomplish what they set out to do, others who could not make the adjustment, and still others change their minds about what it was that they intended to do.

> Every student has a different combination of attributes which contribute to an individual readiness factor and depending on what those are, his or her chances of success would also differ.

Witnessing these many sets of circumstances, attributes and adaptations, somewhat different for each individual, made us realize just how complicated their lives are. The motifs which characterize readiness for college are a mixture of direct responses to our questions and the grounded analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) which emanates from those responses, tempered with an overlay of our (the researchers') awareness as to what is needed for academic survival. Central factors or motifs of readiness include: what the student is stimulated by (what 'turns them on'); what the student genuinely dislikes in the educational process; why the student continues to study; how clearly oriented the student is toward a realistic future in study and career; whether the student is in his or her program of choice; how realistic the student is in the estimation of his or her academic skill level; how realistic the student is in the estimation of his or her work ethic; how the student places blame for weak performance - sometimes called the 'locus of control'; whether the student is a help seeker; whether the student participates in extra curricular activities at school; whether the student has made sacrifices in order to continue to study; whether the student is 'efficient' in the minimal accomplishment of those school tasks which are necessary in order to move forward in the system.

Readiness could be specified more concretely, perhaps even developed into a reliable ordinal scale with some predictive capacity in individual profiles, but our use of the notion here is chiefly descriptive and

The Gulf

Students
Culture of Underachievers

College
School Culture

Individual Success

Retention/Graduation

Persistence   Academic Conversation   Pedagogical Engagement

Efficiency   Bridging/Transition Programs   Gatekeeping

The Wall   The Gulf   Course Requirements

Readiness

Performance Standards

heuristic. It is meant to uncover some of the concrete elements of adapting to a higher level of academic performance. In addition, readiness suggests the contours which an effective transitional program of study would need to address.

Institutional Response to Underachievers

Tinto (1998) estimates that as many as four out of five students enter American colleges with some form of developmental education need. "In some institutions, 'remedial' students now make up a majority of the entering student body, many requiring 'remediation' in virtually every academic skill area." (p.1) The Quebec Ministry of Education, in recognition of this problem and in order to combat the high dropout rate that occurs near the end of high school, has accorded special funding to Cegeps for *Sessions d'accueil et integration* such as the Explorations Program at Vanier.

Yet in a larger sense, Vanier College continues to reproduce itself in its own historic image. Its priorities, rules, delivery of programs and successful participants all espouse a different educational culture from the Sample48. Clearly there are accommodations and explicit attempts to bridge the divide between the college and underachieving students. On the other hand, the scholarship students, professionals and teachers with whom we spoke for this project view post-secondary formal education from the point of view of successful participants. Scholarship students have found their stride in the system, they like what they are doing, are very organized in the pursuit of their goals, and have grabbed their future with both hands. Their educational culture is that of 'apprentices' in post-secondary education and they are succeeding in the system. College professionals observe that the underachievers arrive under-equipped for college, not only in their capacity for the attainment of academic objectives but in a number of behavioural expectations. They also note that certain high schools provide a significantly better grounding than others.

Vanier teachers know that the ground has shifted beneath them. The students they face are often less capable of handling college-level studies than students one generation ago. Some teachers remain pre-occupied by the standards of courses, disciplines and programs, so continue to expect that students who are not doing well in their classes will either seek help or deserve to fail. Other teachers have adjusted their pedagogical techniques and have sought ways to engage those students who are challenged or disaffected by their studies. Such teachers have adjusted both their teaching methods and the amount and type of course content in their offerings in order to enable as high a rate of success as they can manage under the circumstances. Most teachers show little sympathy for the demands which paid work imposes on their students and are stunned by those who demonstrate little motivation to do the course work in order to succeed. Yet most teachers are also sympathetic to the student who appears overwhelmed by the requirements of college studies and these teachers are more willing to try innovative methods to coach those students into a pattern of accomplishment.

> …specially adapted programs share some essential characteristics: they provide personal guidance, they have low student-teacher ratios, and they make learning socially meaningful.

Colleges and high schools in Quebec, Ontario and British Columbia whose special programs we have examined must be seen as the vanguard of a developing strategy in post-secondary education. These programs are characterized, most importantly, by a recognition that many traditional institutional programs of study simply do not work for a significant number of underachieving students. Either those students will continue to not qualify, fail and quit in significant numbers, or else programs are developed which enable access, success, or alternatives for those who are not likely to get there without special help. Those specially adapted programs share some essential characteristics: they provide personal guidance, they have low student-teacher ratios, and they make learning socially meaningful. Some programs also involve peer teaching, dedicated spaces within the

institution, special intermediary certification and a deep involvement of non-teaching professionals.

The institutional side of the gulf, then, presents to the underachieving student a consistent face of achievement and accomplishment, as well as a rarefied set of behavioural standards. The Sample48 are foreigners in this territory. Their occasional successes are exceptional. Ultimately, the difference between the experience of the Sample48 and those who are a part of the system is under-ridden by a class structure which has traditionally protected higher education for the children of those who already had acquired it or could afford to buy it. The profound democratisation of post-secondary study through the creation of Cegeps has, a generation after their creation, brought some chickens home to roost. The societal promise of higher education rings a bit hollow for those who cannot, for whatever reason, buy into the system. Mesdames Lebel and Belair (2004) very succinctly described the impact of this process of democratisation in their article "*Transformer pour evaluer*". *De fait le projet de démocratisation de l'enseignement et particulièrement l'accroissement des cohorts hétérogènes qui s'en suivi ont graduellement mis en exergue l'importance pour le personnel enseignant d'adopter des pratiques pédagogiques aptes a mieux rejoindre les nouvelles cohorts des élèves … plusiers élèves arrivent desormais a l'école sans nécessairment maitriser les codes et les normes implicite de la culture et de la réussite scolaires, un situation pouvant, dans bon nombre de case, nuire a leur acheminement académique.*

The complexity of this new student population demands adaptive institutional strategies.

The Gulf between Educational Cultures

This study clearly delineates two educational cultures, what might be called 'two solitudes'. On the one hand is the institutional culture which has been the basis for secondary and post-secondary education as long as anyone can remember, what might be called school culture, which is shared by high-achieving students. On the other hand is an educational culture which has been created by a generation of underachieving students who have had difficulty meeting the minimum requirements for advancement in the system and whose connection to educational institutions is tenuous. Of course, there is a large middle ground not addressed in this study, that of the typical student who succeeds in college study earning average marks, who typically graduates from a 'two or three year' Cegep program in three or four years.

The culture of educational institutions and its successful participants, namely the teachers, professionals and high-performing students, are embedded in an ideology of education which is content-based, formal in its definitions of requirements, and meritocratic in its performance standards. This institutional view has academic objectives, measures performance by standard numeric indicators and operates as a gate-keeper over entrance to its own programs and to other desirable futures which require formal credentials from post-secondary educational establishments. Most of those who represent the institutional side of the gulf have had personal advantages as a result of their success in the system and they support and respect the values and rules by which that system operates. With the exception of the scholarship students, whose comfort and rewards will surely follow, our informants from the school culture have enjoyed relatively comfortable and rewarding careers in the educational system. Teachers and professionals are largely devoted to helping those who have difficulty meeting the standards of the institution, and work to provide supplementary help and encouragement to those who do not succeed easily.

The culture of the underachieving student is a system of values and norms based on life experience in a school system which has rarely provided either intrinsic satisfaction or academic success. Though many of the students in the bottom quintile of high school graduates have 'succeeded' in their secondary school studies, our research has shown that such success usually has little connection to a

pattern of academic qualification to perform adequately in a Cegep program, particularly a program of choice for the student. These students stumble into Cegep largely unaware of the institutional expectations and often flounder in an academic world which is unfamiliar and mysterious, seemingly unsympathetic to the plight of a young adult who wants to get ahead in life while responding to its multiple pressures.

The most debilitating point of departure for both of these educational cultures is that the skill sets which are needed for effective performance in college study are neither provided in secondary school before their arrival nor effectively taught in the college. In addition, the high school educational culture, along with motivational, emotional and adaptive baggage which has accumulated during the high school experience, serves as an impediment to the kind of direct commitment to post-secondary study which colleges require. A further barrier for such a high school graduate is that the full-time, day format of college offerings provides very little 'wiggle room' for those students who want or need to carry on their responsible adult life, primarily paid employment, while studying. The intersection of these two cultures of education, then, is a quagmire of frustrations and disappointments on both sides of the gulf.

The world in which these students live is complicated, and larger social forces are often deeply experienced yet only vaguely understood. By the time the students in the Sample48 arrived at Cegep, most had studied in at least two languages, most had grown up in a family with at least one lineage which was neither English nor French, most had studied in more than one high school, and most had worked and/or were presently working in the paid work force. Some lived in one-parent families, some had some form of learning difficulty or 'behavioural' problem, and some had experienced a grinding poverty. This makes them quite a different population from the Vanier College student of a generation ago. All were performing weakly in an educational system with standardized curriculum, behavioural requirements and

mechanisms of evaluation. They are the educational 'underdogs.'

For these students the structural issues which underpin their complicated lives are part of the air they breathe. These themes are so profoundly a part of their daily life that explanation of their contours to interviewers such as ourselves did not always come easily. Their terms of reference for such issues are very different from those used by persons attached to educational institutions – it's a bit like asking fish to describe water to a fisher.

Underlying everything else for a significant minority of the Sample48 was simple, unadulterated poverty. Some were living in circumstances wherein the resources needed to study at college level were extremely scarce. Despite the stated formal declaration that Cegep is free education, for many students, adapting to the real cost of post-secondary schooling can be very difficult. In the case of one student from a family on welfare, the expenses kept building, and because of the difficulty in pulling the money together to pay the college fees, there was the added fee for late payment.

Oh, the billing process. I don't like it, because they always want…like with me, because…okay, the first semester, I had to take Explorations 2, and since The Science of Survival was part of Explorations 2, you had to take it, you could not not take it and then it cost $170.00. I'm like okay, but I don't have $170.00 extra dollars. And then in order to get my schedule, I had to go to the Financial Aid office and like okay, I need to see you about getting it. And he's like okay, I'd like to know when you're gonna pay and by when you're gonna pay…. I had no clue of this. So like the most he could give me is like a week or two and I won't have the money by then and if I don't, then there's $50.00 that I have to pay extra…. And so after all it came up to $247.50, no $367.50 and that's a lot, considering the original thing was $147.50 and I think I registered late, yeah, no I registered late the…yeah, I registered late. And so altogether it came to that and then for the next semester because I had to pay it a little later, because I had to get the money and all that,

then there was that whole late registration thing, it was just like such a mess.

It is often presumed that adaptations to a new language of instruction and the complications of immigration with its attendant marginalization are significant factors contributing to educational underachievement. Though this is generally true, we have found that it is not as simple as all that. Many of these students are at least trilingual: they are studying in English, they have done some major part of their earlier studies in French and/or have worked in French, but their first language and the language spoken by their parents is a third one, most often European, though increasingly Middle Eastern, Asian, African or Latin American. This is at least as common a pattern for the scholarship students as for the sample. Yet adapting to different linguistic environments has been a common story for these students. Teachers, themselves often struggling with their second language, will quip that our students speak three languages fluently, yet are literate in none.

Most students in our sample expect to work part-time, as indeed do most students in the public college system.

Some of our sample are clearly 'Bill 101 refugees,' i.e. have been forced by law to study in French elementary and secondary school because their parents were not educated in English in Canada, but have now chosen to study in an English Cegep. Though students of French mother tongue do somewhat better at Vanier than the average student, those who are working three languages have a more complex pattern. Repeated or permanent marginalization as a linguistic or ethnic minority can be expected to interfere both with the learner's engagement in the educational process and with performance on standardized measurements of academic achievement. One of the important effects of such adaptations is the frequent retardation of the pace at which one moves through the school system. When this happens the student finds himself or herself older than the others in the class and embarrassed to continue. Age, geographic mobility and

language of instruction can combine to form a kind of negative synergy which undermines academic advancement.

... So they put me on Sec. III to continue to get the regular diploma, like for under 18. I supposed to continue the post-acceuil, but they didn't let me to go to the post-acceuil because they said I'm over 18. You cannot stay here anymore. But if I was like in Sec. V, they would let me, but they said because of my French, it wasn't perfect, and I supposed to pass two years something to get better....
...That's why I'm late for college, you know. Because I was study two years. One year and a half for the French. Basically they waste my time for French and I was so mad at it, because I didn't get anything. I'm not good in French, I'm not good in English....
...Because as you can see, I waste two years here to study language, so I was getting down in Mathematics. I didn't practice any Mathematics. I didn't practice ... you know if you don't practice for the Mathematics, you're getting down....

Most students in our sample expect to work part-time, as indeed do most students in the public college system. Most of the jobs held have little or nothing to do with the students' field of study, and none said that their job would ever be as important as their studies. Yet there were a couple of instances where the opportunity to work more, make more money or hold more responsibility was attractive enough that it jeopardized academic performance. In at least one case, the student failed his semester because of the additional work-load he took on. These students are 17 or 18 years old when they arrive at college, and most will not finish their college program, if at all, until they are in their twenties. Coming typically from working class families, often from a single parent household, these are young adults active in the general economy. Despite the tuition-free Cegep system, most of these students do not have the option of studying full-time without paid employment. Even those for whom economic circumstances would allow the luxury of not working face the cultural norms of their peers in which work is an imperative to attain

independence. Two young women from the Sample48 explain their circumstance.

Um, well the work thing has always been an issue. I've been helping out my mom for a long time. I pay for my school, I pay for my bus pass, I pay for various things. It was just another step. I'm probably going to be moving in July anyway. I have to pay for my university, so I have to save up money for that. And basically I need to work to be able to go to school. That's actually been the biggest challenge, since a lot of teachers don't understand that. They seem to be offended by the fact that I actually do need to work. As much as I can understand it that they believe that their particular class should be a priority, there should be some level of understanding that not all the students are with their parents.

Well, yeah, cause I can't always depend on my mother and my father, depending on them to give me money, they have like, their own bills to pay and stuff like that. Like, if I want it, I can't really go ask them for it, if I want to go buy a pair of shoes or a pair of, like shoes or clothes or something. I can't always ask them, so. Also for school I help my mom, she paid my fees and I bought my books, so. We kind of like balance it, my dad helps also, so we all like, pitch in here and there to help me.

There are a number of instances wherein the student works in a family business, sometimes in a highly responsible capacity, such as restaurant manager. The stretch between demands of the job and demands of college studies can be wrenching in these particular cases. These cases of working in family businesses can also be both lucrative and tempting as life careers, in which case further education drops down significantly in the list of priorities. The family enterprise offers a serious alternative to the academic world. Knowing that they could fall back on work in the family business may even take the incentive out of working very hard at school. In several cases this pattern follows a long-standing family tradition set by previous generations.

It's something they would love to have, want me to have, you know. 'Cause my family,

education wasn't really… a lot of my cousins, a lot of my uncles, never really graduated university, you know. They got their high school diploma and they went straight to work, you know, for their dads…. That's how it really is in my family. A lot of it, the majority of my cousins and uncles, go to work for their dads after high school.

Structural and Pedagogical Challenges

Certain patterns emerge in the contradictions between the institutional or school culture on the one hand and the educational culture of the bottom quintile on the other. These patterns of interface suggest fruitful avenues for an accommodation by which more students in this cohort might succeed in achieving their educational aims or pursue suitable alternatives which allow them to take a productive and rewarding place in society.

Work and Study

It is imperative that these underachieving students be given the opportunity to study toward their college diploma at a pace which is appropriate in the context of their life demands. Most directly this means that the system, and ultimately the Ministry of Education, must discontinue the practice of financially penalizing those students who cannot afford, in their finances or in their life priorities, to study full-time. Tuition is waived only for those students who enrol on a full-time basis and succeed in most of their courses. Those who must work while studying at a slower pace must pay tuition and often also accumulate significant debt while studying. The Ministry in addition places strong pressure on the colleges to graduate students in the minimum possible time, expecting them to meet unrealistic targets in this respect and putting pressure on students to race through their program as full-time students with burdensome course loads which virtually guarantee high failure rates for those with other heavy responsibilities.

Learning Styles and Teaching Practices

The traditional delivery of college courses through 'chalk and talk,' i.e. the lecture or magisterial method, does not generally serve students in the bottom quintile well. The social nature of these young adults suggests that innovative pedagogies which employ their social desires as teaching tools could help to involve them in the 'academic conversation.' Specific techniques of this type might be more commonly developed if college teachers had some form of teacher training.

Content and Process

The singular focus on course content which is emphasized in most college courses needs to be moderated toward a processual model which enables a student to commence his or her learning from a place in their experience which they can recognize. Put another way: it is one thing to deliver course content, it is another for a student to learn something. Teaching through process will normally also require a higher quotient of individual attention in the instructional strategy, and therefore more favourable teacher-student ratios as well as highly developed supplementary learning services.

> The bridge between high school and Cegep needs to be a 'covered bridge' for the bottom quintile.

Gatekeeper Courses

Certain courses are mandatory pre-requisites for programs at college and university, and therefore careers, or are absolutely required for graduation from a program, yet often failed by students. These courses have served as stumbling blocks for many students who arguably could be capable of attaining the competencies of the program proper, and might well practice the occupation or profession admirably. Two generations ago, one could not be expected to teach English literature unless one had studied Latin or ancient Greek. Today one cannot qualify for entry to many programs without a certain level of Mathematics or Physical Science, or a minimum level of performance on a standardized test. Other programs have bottlenecks at the exit end of the program, such as the Integrative Project course in Social Science. Special effort needs to be made to assure success in such courses through earnest effort, appropriate help, carefully selected or specially trained teachers, favourable teacher-student ratios, or perhaps an adaptation of course material to honour its service function more than its disciplinary parameters.

Transitional programs

The bridge between high school and Cegep needs to be a 'covered bridge' for the bottom quintile. A successful program needs to address both the academic needs of the institution and the inadequate 'skill set' with which the students have been saddled at high school but also take into account the educational culture of the students. Such a program must have a comprehensive orientation early in the first semester, individual 'tracking' for at least two semesters, a complement of non-teaching staff which includes specialists in social helping fields, and use teaching practices which are appropriate, conscious and coordinated.

The Trades and other Practical Pursuits

Many students arrive at Cegep and aim for university study even though they show little enthusiasm for any program of study in this stream nor aptitude for the kinds of learning activities which will be expected of them. Often these individuals have not been made sufficiently aware of other forms of career training which can provide a rewarding vocation, an assured livelihood and less frustration. The generalized paradigm which underscores university study as the only appropriate avenue which can lead to a respectable career needs to be publicly re-examined.

Final Note

All of the essential data for this research was gathered at Vanier College. The student population at Vanier is highly heterogeneous, multi-ethnic and urban. Our students are approximately 40% anglophone, 40% allophone, and 20% francophone. More than 80 languages are spoken by our students. We are a rainbow of ethnicity with many skin colours and many whose parents came from some other part of the globe. We are a bit of an exception in Quebec. Our 'complexion' is shared only by two or three other colleges in 2005. By 2025, given present demographic trends, most large colleges in Quebec, perhaps 20 in total, will look much like Vanier does today. The kind of complicated lives which we describe here may well be shared by many other young Quebecers.

Reference List

Allard, Marie. (2005, 23 avril). L'École publique à Saint-Henri. *La Presse*, p. A2.

Badoux, Claudine et Albert Noircent. (1998). *Mobilité de [genre], sexe et réussite scolaire au collegial. Revue des sciences de l'éducation*. 24(2) pp. 355 – 378.

Baumeister, Roy F., et al. (2005, January). Exploding the Self-Esteem Myth. *Scientific American*, 292 (1), 84.

Bertrand, Mireille. (1994). *Pratiques d'éducation interculturelle au cégep: répertoire analytique et critique*. St-Laurent: Vanier College.

Bouchard, Pierrette, Laurette Coulombe et Jean-Claude St-Amant. (1994). *Abandon scolaire et socialisation selon le sex*. Rapport de recherche: Phase I. Centre de recherche et d'intervention sur la réussite scolaire. Quebec: Université Laval.

Bouchard, Pierrette et Jean-Claude St-Amant. (1996). *Garçons et Filles: stéréotypes et réussite scolaire*. Montréal: Les Éditions du remue-ménage.

Bourdieu, Pierre. (1990). *The Logic of Practice*. (Richard Nice, trans.) Stanford, California: Stanford University Press

Breunig, Mary. (2005). Turning Experiential Education and Critical Pedagogy Theory into Praxis. *Journal of Experiential Education*, 28(2),106 – 122.

Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. (1990). *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. New York : Harper and Row.

Coulombe, Laurette. (1993). *Garçons et filles: Socialisation, stéréotypes et réussite scolaire*. Centre de recherche et d'intervention sur la réussite scolaire. Quebec : Université Laval et la Centrale de l'enseignement du Québec.

Crépeau, Marie et Alain Gagnon. (1997). *Soutien social et réussite scolaire des garçons*. Rapport PAREA. Montréal: Collège de Bois-de-Boulogne.

Curtis, Bruce, D.W. Livingstone and Harry Smaller. (1992). *Stacking the Deck: The Streaming of Working Class Kids in Ontario Schools*. Toronto: Our Schools / Our Selves Education Foundation.

Davis, Fran and Greta Hofmann Nemiroff. (1993). *Towards a Gender-Fair Education in the Cegeps*. Montreal: Dawson College.

Davis, Fran and Arlene Steiger. (1996). *Gender and Persistence in the Sciences*. St. Laurent: Vanier College.

Dewey, John. (1938). *Experience and Education*. New York: MacMillan.

Freire, Paulo. (1970). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum.

Glaser, Barney G., and Anselm L. Strauss. (1967). *The discovery of Grounded Theory : Stragegies for Qualitative Research*. Aldine: Chicago.

Lamarre, Jean et Michel Ouellet. (1999). *Pour une meilleure réussite scolaire des garçons et des filles*. Quebec: Conseil supérieur de l'éducation.

Lapierre, Louise and Sylvie Loslier. (2003). *Identité immigrante et apprentissage en contexte collégiale.* St-Laurent: Cégep de Saint-Laurent.

Lebel, Christine and Louise Belair. (2004). Évaluer pour transformer. *Pédagogie collégiale,* 18(1).

Neufeld, Gordon (2005). *The Trouble With Kids These Days*. www.GordonNeufeld.com

Péloquin, Florian. and André Baril. (2002). *La Culture Générale et les jeunes*. Québec: Les Presses de l'Université Laval.

Pomeroy, Eva. (2000). *Experiencing Exclusion*. Stoke-on-Trent, England: Trentham Books Limited.

Potvin, Maryse. (2000). Racisme et citoyenneté chez les jeunes Québécois de la deuxième génération haïtienne. dans l'ouvrage collectif Maryse Potvin, Bernard Fournier et Yves Couture, (ed.) *L'individu et le citoyen dans la société moderne*. Montréal: Presses de l'Université de Montréal.

Roy, Jacques. (2003). Les logiques sociales qui conditionnent la réussite en milieu collégial. *Pédagogie collégiale*, 17(1).

Roy, Jacques. (2006). Pour une pedagogie qui tient compte de la realite et de la culture des jeunes. *Pedagogie collegiale*, 19(3).

Roy, Jacques, Nicole Mainguy, et al. (2005). *Étude comparée sur la réussite scolaire en milieu collégial selon une approche d'écologie social*. Rapport de recherche PAREA. Sainte-Foy: Cegep Saint-Foy / Observatoire Jeunes et Societe.

Terrill, Robert, Robert Ducharme, et Nicole Plante. (1994). *Passages secondaire-collégial: Caractéristiques étudiantes et rendement scolaire*. Montreal: SRAM.

Tinto, Vincent. (1996, Fall). Reconstructing the first year of college: Colleges may need to refocus their retention programs. *Planning for Higher Education,* 25.

Tinto, Vincent and Stacy Riemer. (1998). *Learning Communities and the Reconstruction of Remedial Education in Higher Education*. Presentation to Conference on Replacing Remediation in Higher Education at Stanford University, January 1998.

Tinto, Vincent. (2002). *Taking Student Retention Seriously: Rethinking the First Year of College*. A speech presented at the annual meeting of the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admission Officers, April 15, 2002, Minneapolis, Minnesota.