

OVERVIEW OF AN INTER-LEVEL PROJECT

NEW DISABLED-STUDENT POPULATIONS*

Following a request for proposals by the Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport (MELS) [Department of Education, Recreation and Sport], an inter-level project (IP) designed to facilitate the integration of new disabled populations¹ into colleges and universities was launched in February 2010. The name of this project, which involves stakeholders from the CÉGEP du Vieux Montréal, Collège Montmorency, the Université du Québec à Montréal and the Université de Montréal, is «Integrating New Disabled-Student Populations into Institutions of Higher Learning: Mission Possible!». Provided below is an overview of both the work completed to date and that remaining to be done.

NEED FOR AN INTER-LEVEL PROJECT

Although the development of a new collaborative approach for Quebec's institutions of higher learning constitutes a major goal of the IP, the project's main goal is to propose a college-university integration and transition model for disabled students, so as to standardize and bolster the accommodation and support measures developed by the four institutions in question. Another objective is to provide educators at both levels with support. Until the fall of 2012, when the IP is slated to end, it will be playing the role of a pilot project to be subsequently used as a template for action taken throughout the postsecondary network.

Eventually, the work of the IP will make it possible to find solutions to the problems identified by the four institutions mentioned above:

LACK OF INFORMATION: Students are not required to disclose information on their disability when transitioning from one level to the next, and there are no procedures to make that information available.

LACK OF ASSESSMENT FOR PRACTICES: In their hurry to act, all institutions have established accommodation measures and services whose effectiveness is very rarely assessed.

LACK OF SUPPORT FOR EDUCATORS: Over the years, the post-secondary network has established intake structures for disabled students that proved useful until the number of such students, especially those with learning disabilities and

attention deficit disorders (ADD), began to increase considerably. These new populations are continuing to grow, with the nature of the disabilities becoming increasingly complex and accurately diagnosed. As a result, educators are now starting to feel burned out and require support.

LACK OF RESEARCH: Studies could be used to help educators and other professionals with the intake and inclusion of special-needs students, especially those constituting so-called “emerging” populations.

All documents produced as part of the inter-level project are or will be available on the Website of the Consortium d'animation sur la persévérance et la réussite en enseignement supérieur (CAPRES) [Leadership Consortium on Student Perseverance and Success].

[www.quebec.ca/capres/Interordre-Montreal.shtml].

THE WORK OF THE PROJECT

Phase 1 – Facilitating the Inter-Level (College-University) Transition

The activities related to Phase 1 of the project have two objectives. The first is to standardize the administrative documents used by college and university professionals for the intake and integration of disabled students. This standardization will ensure greater consistency in and improved flow of information between educational institutions at the time of transition.

The documents drafted by the working groups established in the context of the IP, such as the personal-information disclosure consent form, are paramount from both an organizational and an ethical standpoint. Institutions of higher learning are now obliged, both morally and legally, to provide accommodation measures to students who can provide a medical diagnosis from a recognized professional. Accordingly, in June 2010, project coordinators submitted four different forms to

* This article was written with the help of Catherine Deslières, BA, who works as an assistant on the inter-level committee.

¹ These new disabled populations, or “emerging” populations, include students with learning disabilities, ADD (with or without hyperactivity), pervasive development disorders (PDD) (disorders falling into the autism spectrum) and mental-health problems.



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the Commission des droits de la personne et des droits de la jeunesse (CDPDJ) [Human and Youth Rights Protection Commission] for its opinion on their compliance with social and legal requirements. These opinions, as well as the documents in question, were put to the test in 2011-2012, and are now available on the CAPRES Website.

The second objective of Phase 1 is to make students aware of the opportunity to avail themselves of special assistance while pursuing a university education. In an effort to inform students of the challenges inherent in the college-university transition, the IP had to identify the most appropriate tools (workshops, discussions, lectures, testimonials on audio or video clip, etc.) for the populations in question. These tools had to provide answers to the main questions asked by college students—for example, “What does university involve?”, “What is it like to be a university student?” or “How can I get my career plans off the ground?”.

To meet this last objective, a special Website,² posters and leaflets were designed. Although it contains a wealth of information useful to all stakeholders, including parents and educators, the Website is intended for use primarily by students. It features explanations on a variety of disabilities, video testimonials from disabled university graduates currently working in their chosen field, advice, links and so on. The posters and leaflets, which have been distributed at the institutions involved in the IP, will be made available in a reproducible format on the CAPRES site sometime in 2012.

In the same vein, the IP team developed two workshops. The first encourages college students wanting to prepare for university to think about the transition ahead, analyze their current situation, reflect on their academic path to date and ponder the challenges that await, so as to develop a realistic picture of what they should work on before the first day of postsecondary classes. The second is intended for students who are already attending university but are looking for support and tools that will allow them to adapt better to, and integrate more fully into, their environment. These workshops, offered for the first time in 2011 at the four participating institutions, help students determine which route to take, identify their strengths and decide which dimensions of their learning process require improvement. Students are assisted in this exercise and directed, if necessary, to the appropriate resources. IP partners emphasize the accountability of all stakeholders, in particular the students themselves. With proper guidance, students can take charge of their own path toward autonomy, inclusion and participation in society. Workshop materials can be found on the CAPRES site.

Phase 2 – Best Practices

The aim of Phase 2 of the IP is to identify integration and transition approaches for “emerging” disabled populations, in an effort to establish a list of best practices. Accordingly, the IP assembled a body of research reports on the action taken with these students since 1995 in postsecondary institutions in Quebec and elsewhere. This resulted, firstly, in the meta search conducted by Marc Tremblay.³ Subsequently, neuropsychologist Anne-Laure Macé, who works at the Université de Montréal’s Centre étudiant de soutien à la réussite [Student Support and Career Development Centre], among other institutions, and psychologist and career-development advisor France Landry, from the Université du Québec à Montréal’s student-services office, have conducted a major review of the literature (Macé and Landry, 2012) that will be available on the CAPRES site by the fall of 2012. This review—a survey of the empirical studies on support measures provided by postsecondary institutions to emerging populations—was performed in an effort to identify best practices.

Although it contains a wealth of information useful to all stakeholders, including parents and educators, the Website [www.matransition.com] is intended for use primarily by students.

Phase 3 – Better Equipping Our Educators

The aim of Phase 3 of the IP is to deal with educators’ concerns by equipping them to better take account of the needs of new disabled-student populations. The activities involved in this phase can be divided into four steps. The first was geared toward a survey of the literature on the educational adjustments and class-management techniques necessitated by the integration of new disabled populations into institutions of higher learning (see below). The second step involved discussion groups with educators, organized by the four participating academic institutions to collect data on their experiences as well as their related training and support needs. In the third step, this process was followed up by an online questionnaire aimed at those who had been unable to travel to participate in a discussion group. The goal of step four was to consolidate existing approaches and create new tools to better equip educators in their work with the target student populations. The results of this last step will be available on the CAPRES at some point in 2012.

² [www.matransition.com]

³ [http://www.uquebec.ca/capres/Publications/Projet-interordre/Volet-2/Bilan-metarecherche-juin-2011.pdf]



Phase 3 of the IP involved a survey of literature from Quebec, the rest of Canada and the United States conducted to identify classroom techniques appropriate for new disabled populations (Inter-level Committee, 2012). The main approaches are discussed below.

Universal Design of/for Instruction (UDI) is a promising avenue that has been identified as suitable for use with emerging populations. This approach, which is discussed in greater detail in another article in this issue, combines techniques specifically adapted to the needs of disabled students with general techniques that can benefit all students as a whole. This general method for planning classroom learning and teaching activities therefore not only meets the needs of emerging populations, but is also suitable for the varied types of learners present in all types of classes. The same holds true for educator-student interaction, one of the most decisive factors in the academic success of disabled students.

In some of the literature, however, the authors do discuss which teaching strategies are most helpful for each of the four groups of emerging populations. These are:

LEARNING DISABILITIES

The strategies best suited for dyslexic students are additional time, access to an oral version of the materials, advance copy of course notes or exam contents, and exam questions involving only one component or bearing on only one aspect of the subject matter. Dysorthographic students get better results when they can consult a personalized glossary; educators can also help by writing the session plan on the board, explaining difficult words, introducing concepts in the form of graphics or tables, summarizing concepts explored in a list as a means to prepare for an exam, etc. For all students with learning disabilities, encouraging them to voice their knowledge while showing them how to recognize the strategies they have used to acquire and master that knowledge has a beneficial effect.

ATTENTION DEFICIT DISORDERS (WITH OR WITHOUT HYPERACTIVITY)

Students with ADD are more attentive if seated at the front of the room and if the educator establishes frequent visual contact with them, occasionally asking them to explain the tasks assigned in their own words. These individuals, more than any other students, need to be reminded frequently of deadlines.

PERVASIVE DEVELOPMENT DISORDERS

It has been proven that students with a pervasive development disorder (PDD) need the subject explained in detail, a well-established classroom routine and a thorough explanation of any changes to the course schedule or outline.

MENTAL-HEALTH PROBLEMS

The best strategies for students with mental-health problems are to organize a schedule to help them get through the cycles imposed by their disorder and the side effects of their medication, as well as to reduce the number of oral presentations and group projects, as tasks of this type cause them considerable stress. It is also appropriate to allow them to leave the room to calm down when they are feeling unsettled.

The lack of information on issues relating to the integration of emerging populations in Quebec's postsecondary institutions, together with the lack of empirical data on the appropriate educational practices, contributes to feelings of concern among educators. Educators are particularly sensitive to the distinctive characteristics of students with mental-health problems and PDD, and these disorders, because they are less well known, leave instructors who fear an exacerbation in affected students' status very confused.

Various Quebec stakeholders are currently interested in all aspects of the integration issue, including the Research Centre for the Educational and Professional Integration of Students with Disabilities (CRISPESH), a new College Technology Transfer Centre in Innovative Social Practices (CCTT-PSN) affiliated with the CÉGEP du Vieux Montréal and Dawson College, and with Dawson College's Adaptech Research Network, which is extremely active in disabled-student research.

WHAT NEXT?

For guidance counsellors, the integration of disabled students into postsecondary educational institutions has revealed a need to discuss the day-to-day practices used with these students, as well as the attendant challenges. By means of and thanks to help from the IP, these valuable college and university staff members have undertaken measures to establish a provincial network for all guidance counsellors working in the field of higher learning and in rehabilitation centres.

Regular information on the work of the IP is provided in the higher-learning network, especially via the CAPRES Website,



seminars and conferences. The IP team hopes to establish a presence where its members can contribute to advances made in the intake and integration of disabled students. The IP coordinator, for example, took part in the work of the CDPDJ's Working Group on accommodating special educational needs at the college level, and is also involved with the Association québécoise des étudiants ayant des incapacités au postsecondaire (AQEIPS)⁴ in producing information in digital format.

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The integration of emerging populations in institutions of higher learning has raised structural, social, educational and legal questions such as: Can students who make up these populations successfully complete their studies? What is the respective responsibility of each stakeholder if the student fails? From an ethical standpoint, because other students do not receive any special assistance, does this not constitute discrimination? How can educators manage a class when there are several students with different disorders in the same group?

Without claiming to have the answers to all these questions, which need to be brought out in the open in order to be discussed, the IP team feels that its work and information activities constitute a good start. If we all work together, we can reach a solution. ●

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⁴ Quebec Association for Postsecondary Students with Disabilities.