A STRUCTURE OF INTERVENTIONS FOR A COHERENT APPROACH TO STUDENT SUCCESS

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The development and implementation of success plans in CEGEPs were required in 2000 by the Quebec Minister of Education. Such a requirement was the result of a consensus on skills training for youth which had been reached at the *Sommet du Québec et de la jeunesse* in February 2000. The abolition of the tax on failure in 2001 also coincided with the appearance of success plans in the college network. The success and graduation of the greatest number of students has become so important an issue that the strategic development plans of CEGEPs must now give priority to success plans.

At *Cégep de Matane,* our success plans have always been characterized by a major preoccupation with students at risk, without neglecting the overall student population. What type of support to offer to students? How to identify those who are in need of support? What are the resources and tools at our disposal for intervening? How to evaluate the results (the degree of satisfaction of students who have had recourse to the resource people and tools, re-enrolment and success rates for courses in the second session)? These are the questions we attempt to answer in the following pages.[1]

▶ IN SEARCH OF THE RIGHT SOLUTION

We mention at the outset that the assessments of our first three success plans provide evidence of our search for the best possible approach for supporting students experiencing difficulties. From one plan to another there is no break, we are in transition as is shown in the table opposite.

Without going into details, the main characteristic of our plans is to offer to students, as of the first session, the human resources, measures and tools for fostering the most harmonious adaptation possible to the requirements of studies at the college level. In this regard, two principles have always guided our actions: 1) seeing the students as the main architects of their own success, and 2) offering support with a view to developing their autonomy.

The connection between the two principles at the heart of our success plans is that, in order to succeed, students must first and foremost be autonomous or, at least, demonstrate some autonomy during the first session, in order to become the true architects of their own success. We were inspired by our educational project on fundamental education which proposes three axes of development, including that of autonomy.

Since 2004, we have been coordinating our efforts in order to support students at risk. The term 'support' was selected with care: to provide 'support' is quite different from 'supervising' or 'training'. For us, support means establishing meaningful relationships between the interveners and the students.

In such a spirit, it is less a matter of controlling students as it is of helping them to become aware of the facts and actions that concern them. Ultimately, if students do not follow a piece of advice, they will end up making their own choices later. For example, if we recommend that they take advantage of the services provided at the *Centre d'aide en français* (*CAF*) and they decide not to do so, then that is their choice. On the other hand, the interveners take note of this in order to have a record in case follow-up is necessary later.

MAIN CHARACTERISTICS OF THE EVOLUTION OF SUCCESS PLANS
Plan 1: 2001-2004- Support Services Projects
• A call for projects was sent out to departments and programs requiring that they identify students and offer support activities to them.
Plan 2: 2004-2007-Resource Person for Success Assistance
• This person, someone with the status of a teacher, had the mandate to support students at risk and to direct them towards professionals and help measures.
Plan 3: 2008-2010- First Semester Pedagogy (FSP)
• A designated teacher (the person teaching the Introduction to the Program course) had the mandate to carry out support activities and to refer students at risk to a teacher responsible for follow-up.

The frontline support providers, those who are most often in contact with students, are the teachers, for sure. They are the privileged witnesses of the students' progress, of their

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[1] The answers pertaining to the re-enrolment and success rates will not be known until the spring of 2011.

learning, of their limitations as well as of their failures. This said, they alone cannot carry out the mandate of awakening the students' awareness and of supporting them through the various difficulties they encounter: other resource people are brought into play.

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◗ FIRST SEMESTER PEDAGOGY: A MATTER OF CONCERTED ACTION

Within the scope of our most recent success plan, all the interveners concerned act within what is referred to in the college network as First Semester Pedagogy (FSP). In this context, we gave this some local colour by first putting in place a First Semester Pedagogy committee in order to determine what we meant by this type of pedagogy and to evaluate the possibilities of implementing it.

In May 2008, a pedagogical day was held in order to generate support for the project and, a few weeks later, workshops were offered to all the teachers of the first session in order for them to familiarize themselves with a kit developed for supporting students. This kit is intended to be a reference for teachers of the Introduction to the Program course. It proposes support activities to help students face the challenge of the transition from secondary school to college. Following an evaluation of the use of the kit in December 2009, a number of improvements were made to it and another workshop was offered exclusively to teachers of the Introduction to the Program course in August 2010.

The FSP is based on the two principles that we mentioned earlier and it gives special consideration to the shock that many students experience during the transition from secondary school to college. In summary, we have focused on six characteristics of the challenge associated with this transition.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CHALLENGE RELATING TO THE TRANSITION FROM SECONDARY SCHOOL TO COLLEGE[2]

In Social Terms

Many students have left a group of friends and must now recreate another group to belong to in order to counteract isolation.

Time Management

Time management (courses, free periods in the schedule, paid work, etc.) constitutes a novelty for young adults. Estimating the workload and preparing for courses as well as preparing for examinations and assignments complicate matters for many students. Not to mention that the school year at the secondary level is transformed, at the college level, into two 15-week sessions.

The Program of Studies

For the first time in their school lives, students are enrolled in a program of studies. As of the first weeks of courses, everything can come into play for them since they must make sense out of what they are doing and confirm their vocational choices.

Institutional Rules

The application of new institutional rules, especially with regard to class attendance and the possibility of dropping a course, presupposes that students properly assess the consequences of decisions they have to make.

Transfer Abilities

This passage from secondary school to college is also a test for students of their abilities to make the transfer within a perspective of continuity. In this sense, such a passage is not a complete rupture with their jobs as secondary school students.

General Education

General education courses, particularly those of French and Philosophy, constitute a novelty that will require a period of adaptation for a good number of college students.

The kit prepared for the teachers includes prescriptive activities and references for carrying them out. These activities take place during the Introduction to the Program course, to which an hour has been added. They consist of activities for getting acquainted, for creating a school agenda that covers planning studies in relation to examination dates and for handing in assignments, for learning how to use the work presentation guidebook – to name a few of the most relevant support activities – and this in order that students in difficulty can be identified within the first four weeks of courses.

With the goal of supporting the work done by teachers of the Introduction to the Program course, a procedure and a screening grid were also provided. Our assessments of the implementation of First Semester Pedagogy during the winter sessions of 2008 and 2009 had revealed particular shortcomings with

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[2] Table inspired by MÉTAYER, P. (1991). *Pédagogie de la première session, Trousse 1.* Carrefour de la réussite.

regard to the means used for tracking and referring students in difficulty. This is why this procedure and this screening grid were developed. The grid includes indicators with regard to attitudes and behaviours signalling that a student is in difficulty. As for the procedure that was put in place, teachers are invited to confirm with their colleagues the negative attitudes and behaviours previously observed in class with the help of this grid. To confirm the information on the screening grid with colleagues, it is essential that this be done formally with the grid being completed beforehand by the teacher giving the Introduction to the Program course, and this preferably at a departmental meeting. In cases involving a course in a contributing discipline or in a general education course, there is no automatic validation with the departments involved. The teacher of the Introduction to the Program course schedules a meeting with the teacher concerned, if necessary.

Following this, if teachers feel that a student is in difficulty and that the required interventions are beyond their fields of competence, they refer the student to another resource person who has a mandate to do the required follow-up. This resource person is the teacher responsible for following up on students at risk.

The teachers responsible for the follow-up meet, as needed, with the teachers of the Introduction to the Program course for more precise information on the situations of the students who have been referred to them. They also meet the students involved in order to seek a solution to the problems they have encountered. This solution is implemented quickly in order to help the students to finish their sessions successfully.

> *This work of concerted support by the various interveners has only one objective: to help students who really need additional support outside of course hours.*

In this process, it is anticipated that students may be referred to specialized resource people (a person for individual pedagogical help, a guidance counsellor or a student services psychologist) if the teachers responsible for follow-up feel that they cannot intervene effectively. To sum up, there are three intervention levels for supporting students.

Level 1: **The Teacher Responsible for the Introduction to the Program Course**

Types of intervention:
- Carrying out the support activities in the kit
- Using the screening grid
- Meeting with the student in difficulty
- Referring the student, if necessary

Level 2: **The Teacher Responsible for Following up on Students at Risk**

Types of intervention:
- Meeting with the students
- Offering workshops appropriate for the difficulties encountered
- Referring the student to the professional concerned according to the nature of the difficulty, if necessary

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Level 3: **Professionals from Student Services (Pedagogical Assistant, Guidance Counsellor, Psychologist)**

Types of intervention (the most frequent)
- Pedagogical Assistant: making a student aware of the various consequences of dropping out and failure
- Guidance Counsellor: confirming the choice of program
- Psychologist: supporting a student who is struggling with personal problems

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AN ADDED PEDAGOGICAL VALUE

This work of concerted support by the various interveners has only one objective: to help students who really need additional support outside of course hours. Support that aims to develop autonomy constitutes additional help, and is, to some extent, the added pedagogical value that can make the difference between failing and passing a course, between dropping out and pursuing one's studies.

In addition to the three levels of intervention, we relied on three support measures which are highly appreciated by the students: the *Centre d'aide en français* (*CAF*), peer tutoring and the mid-session report card. The *CAF* offers individual services to students at risk. Essentially, *CAF* interveners provide personalized assistance based on each student's particular issues related to the correct usage of the linguistic code. With regard to peer tutoring, the tutors are students recruited from various programs. These students possess the necessary qualities to help their peers with their studies and they are required to follow a basic training course.

For its part, the mid-session report card contains the academic results available by the first week of October, thereby providing a quick overview of the students' results. Since the comments of the teachers regarding the attitudes and behaviour of the students also appear on the report card, it is therefore possible to inform students if they are headed for success or failure at a meeting which is the responsibility of the department coordinator. It is worth mentioning here that the assessments of our success plans confirm the relevance of such measures.

Success calls for autonomous students as well as for educators who support them, just as the effectiveness of interventions

stems from a structured and coherent approach to those interventions. We intend to further consolidate such an approach in the next success plan.

This is the first time that we have tested the procedure and the screening grid. It is therefore to be expected that some adjustments will be required in the future so that individual interveners can fulfill their roles effectively. However, one finding has been clear from the beginning of the session: teachers responsible for the Introduction to the Program course greatly appreciate the fact that a team of interveners is supporting their efforts to be supportive. They are aware that the success of the transition from secondary school to college for many college students does not rest only on their shoulders.

◗ CONCLUSION

In the winter of 2011, we will check with first semester students to see if such a measure with three levels of intervention has proven to be effective, and this by means of the questionnaire entitled, "Help Us to Know You 2" (qualitative dimension). We will also examine the re-enrolment and success rates in second-session courses over the past five years in order to compare the results (quantitative dimension). Coupled with the perceptions of the educational agents (session assessments), the data collected will serve as the basis for writing our fourth success plan, which will no doubt once again put the emphasis on autonomy, while insisting on a new element which is almost a corollary, namely student engagement.

Engagement in their studies presupposes the acquisition of a high level of autonomy on the part of students, particularly those who have more difficulties than others in the passage from secondary school to college. Support during the acquisition of this autonomy will always constitute a preliminary step for projects which seek to foster student engagement. ◗

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