

EXPECTATIONS RELATIVE TO COLLEGE STUDIES

If we look at our progress in reaching the objectives outlined in the ministère de l'Éducation document *Prendre le virage du succès* (1998), recent statistics on the frequency of students graduating from college show disappointing results. Quebec's college system, which began in the late sixties, was created to allow the state to rectify a relative lack of accessibility to postsecondary studies in comparison to other Canadian provinces. To date, the dual goal of offering quality education while increasing the number of graduates has been partly achieved. The rate of access has grown from 39% in 1975-76 to almost 60% today (a relatively stable rate since 1985-86 according to the 2006 edition of *Indicateurs de l'Éducation*, a Ministère document). However, the drop-out rate of students before program completion remains a cause for concern.

Indeed, statistics provided by the ministère de l'Éducation, des Loisirs et du Sport show that in 2003-2004, only 72.2% of students enrolled in pre-university courses in college graduated; whereas, the rate was 62.6% for students enrolled in technical training. Moreover, this general rate revealed an important variation between girls and boys. In fact, whereas 78.1% of girls graduate from pre-university programs and 68.7% from technical programs, these proportions are only 64.1% and 55.2% respectively for boys. This difference is nothing new because it has been relatively constant since 1995-96 (*Indicateurs de l'Éducation*, 2006).

INTEGRATING AND PERSEVERING IN ONE'S STUDIES

It is generally acknowledged that the creation of CEGEPs was a crucial cornerstone in the road that students travel. In a 1993 study on academic success carried out by the ministère de l'Éducation during the first trimester of college studies, it was thought that behaviours observed in the first session would be accurate predictors of students' future performance and their perseverance in school. Although scientific literature on personal and motivational adaptation to the transition from primary to secondary education is relatively abundant, literature on adaptation to the transition from secondary level to college is not. However, we should underscore the work and initiatives done throughout the Quebec network to identify characteristics that are present among students who will persist and succeed as well as those who will not. Studies by Barbeau (1994), Larose and Roy (1992), Métayer (1991), Monaghan and Chaloux (2004), and de Paradis (2000) are relevant to this subject. Moreover, many colleges realized that key efforts were needed to provide action plans and/or interventions to support the integration of students into their new educational environment (information sessions at secondary schools, guided tours, a welcome day, sponsorship, assistance in learning, support workshops, etc.). Some of these programs are specifically designed for students who are considered at risk on the basis of their performance at the secondary level. While recognizing the importance of working with these students, it seems to us that simply focusing on them is not enough to reach the targeted objective, which is to significantly increase the rate of success in colleges.

We agree with several researchers and we believe that the adaptation of students to a new educational environment is linked to individual factors that are present well before the student's arrival at college (Camblin, 2004; Denoncourt, Bouffard, Dubois and McIntyre, 2004; Eastman, 2000). Thus, it follows logically that increased understanding of the factors linked to a successful transition to college must necessarily take into consideration the prior characteristics of students. In doing so, we may be able to determine how these characteristics are changing and how they are connected to perseverance and the successful completion of a program of studies.

THE POWER OF EXPECTATIONS

A transition to college involves multiple changes in the social and pedagogical environment, the supervision and autonomy levels granted to students, the demands and workload, the amount of work required to succeed, etc. How do students perceive these future changes? Are they aware of the magnitude of the challenges awaiting them in college? How do they anticipate this transitional period? Zeedyk, Gallagher, Henderson, Hope, Husband and Lindsay (2003), pointed out that literature on expectations is essentially American and not widely disseminated. The expectations and beliefs of a person towards coming events generally constitute an organizational system for the interpretation of these events when they occur.

In his theory on stress and coping, Lazarus (1991) suggests that expectations of students towards their future school environment can influence the way they will adapt to it when the time comes. According to this theory, events are stressful insofar as they are perceived as being dangerous or threatening. Thus, the mere fact of having positive expectations and seeing college entry



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as desirable could facilitate adaptation to the event, whereas conversely, a negative feeling of apprehension towards the change could make the adaptation less successful.

According to Wargo (1999), expectations play a particularly important role when the student has mixed feelings towards his personal effectiveness and finds it difficult to trust his competencies or prior achievements to predict the future. However, Lazarus suggests that a positive evaluation of an event resulting from a distortion of reality and consisting of denying stressful aspects, or ignorance of the conditions and requirements of the future situation is also unfavourable to adaptation. To this effect, after examining the role of expectations in the context of a transition to university, Pancer, Hunsberger, Pratt and Alisat (2000), report that a discrepancy between overly-positive expectations of students versus the reality of university life (which is more difficult than expected), may lead many to drop out. The Fédération des cégeps (1999) already raised the question as to potential problems that may arise in many students as a result of their biased thinking and from an exaggerated optimism of what awaits them at CEGEP.

On the other hand, having mostly negative expectations towards college is not conducive to the development of strategies to deal with change, because it is an essentially defeatist attitude. It seems that students who can anticipate problems and consider various strategies to resolve them, with the support of other positive elements, tend to adapt more quickly and easily to new situations and new challenges presented by their arrival

at college versus those who avoid recognizing the potentially problematic nature of the situation or simply deny it. To promote optimal adaptation, we would suggest a pattern of mixed and well-balanced expectations. A student who respects this pattern can be motivated to avoid negativity while developing strategies that favour the achievement of his positive expectations.

▶ A STUDY ON THE EXPECTATIONS OF YOUTH

The general objective of our two-year longitudinal study, begun in the Spring of 2006 with students in their last year of secondary school, was to determine the role of the motivational system in students who make a successful transition from secondary school to college. One of our goals was to sketch a portrait of expectations that secondary students have towards college studies. The results are presented in this article.

A total of 2,209 students from Secondary 5 (1,003 boys and 1,206 girls) agreed to take part in our study. These students were from 14 secondary schools chosen to facilitate follow-ups at the four CEGEPs participating in the study (Cégep régional de Lanaudière à Joliette and L'Assomption, Gérald-Godin and Sorel-Tracy). Among student respondents, 1,691 (76.6%; 70.2% of boys and 81.8% of girls) stated they had applied for admission at a CEGEP. For their first choice, 1,029 (60.9%) enrolled in pre-university programs, 497 in Social Sciences, 287 in Natural sciences and 245 in Liberal Arts, 530 (30.3%) in a technical training program and 95 (5.6%) in a Welcome and Integration session (37 students did not specify their choice of program on the questionnaire). The percentage of students from our sample who indicated that they wanted to go to CEGEP is higher than the access rate to university studies for the entire network (which was 59.3% in 2004-2005). However, it is important to keep in mind that we are referring to the proportion of students who applied and not those who were accepted.

We asked the students who applied for admission to CEGEP to predict the results they thought they would be able to achieve in their first college session (based on a 5-point scale going from "much higher than average" to "much lower than average"). Students were then asked, also using a 5-point scale, if they believed they would have to work less, work as much, or work more than in Secondary 5 in order to succeed.

Our questionnaire on expectations contained 35 statements of positive and negative expectations that secondary students were likely to have. For each statement, the students were asked to choose their level of agreement on a 6-point scale going from "In complete disagreement" to "In complete agreement". A factorial exploratory analysis carried out on the results allowed us to identify six main categories of expectations that include a total of 30 statements. Five statements were not connected to any category and were excluded from the analyses. The box presented next page describes the six categories of measured expectations.



DESCRIPTION OF 6 CATEGORIES OF MEASURED EXPECTATIONS

1) DIFFICULTY OF THE ACTIVITIES	<p>This category corresponds to the belief that the tasks and various activities in college will be more difficult than at secondary level.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• It will be more difficult to understand certain subject matters.• Work assignments to complete will be easier. (reverse item)• At CEGEP, subject matter will be covered at a much faster pace.• Assignments and examinations will be much more difficult.• It will be more difficult to get grades as good as those obtained in secondary.• There will be many more assignments and homework.• I will have to work less in order to succeed.• Evaluations will be much stricter. (reverse item)• It will be more difficult to plan all that must be done given the different subject matters.• A good understanding of what is being taught will be more important than just memorizing.
2) SUPPORT FROM PROFESSORS	<p>Statements of this category refer to the belief that CEGEP professors will be much less available and supportive than those at secondary.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• CEGEP professors will show less interest in individual students.• At CEGEP, it will be much more difficult to get help from professors.• CEGEP professors are not available to meet their students outside of course hours.• In general, professors will not be as interesting.
3) INTEREST LEVEL OF THE PROFESSORS AND THE ACTIVITIES	<p>This category contains statements relating to the belief that professors and school assignments will be much more interesting than they were at secondary.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Professors will know the subject matter in greater depth.• Work assignments will be more interesting.• Assignments and examinations will be more challenging to our intelligence.• Professors will be more interesting.• Professors will be better able to elaborate on their subject matter.
4) AUTONOMY	<p>This category corresponds to the perception that college activities allow for greater personal freedom and less control from professors and other college personnel.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• There will be much less supervision than in secondary.• The professors will trust us more and exercise less control over our work.
5) CONTROL OVER MOTIVATION	<p>This category includes statements relative to the perception that college offers more distractions, making it more difficult to focus on studies and demanding greater personal discipline.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• It will be more difficult to be disciplined and attend all our courses.• There will be more distractions preventing us from concentrating on our studies.• At CEGEP, we can skip a course now and then.• There will be more free time than in secondary.• There are greater opportunities and more places to meet friends outside of courses.
6) SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT	<p>Statements in this category relate to the appreciation for the quality of the environment at CEGEP and also measure the level of agreement with assertions that CEGEP is a more impersonal and colder place than secondary school.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Everyone is more individualistic, it will be more difficult to make friends.• Competition between students will be greater.• Making new friends will be more difficult.• The atmosphere will be more impersonal and we will feel more isolated..



WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE THINK OF COLLEGE STUDIES

First, we reviewed possible differences between boys and girls. Figure 1 shows the distribution of boys and girls based on the grades they believe they can achieve for their first session in college. These results indicate that expectations, for the most part, are very positive for the majority of the students who believe themselves capable of achieving average or above-average grades. It should be noted that more boys than girls seem to anticipate results that are slightly higher or much higher than average.

The responses provided also indicate differences according to the type of training chosen. Students who enrol in pre-university programs (44.6%) are more likely to anticipate results that are slightly above or much higher than average versus those who enrol in technical programs (31.7%) or Welcome and Integration sessions (18.7%). Conversely, students enrolled in the Welcome and Integration sessions are more likely to expect results that are slightly below or much lower than average (16.5% relative to 8.7% and 9.4% respectively for pre-university and technical programs).

Concerning the work they will have to do to reach their desired results, the vast majority of students expect to do a little more work or much more work than they did in Secondary 5 (refer to figure 2). This is true for 89.7% of the students enrolled in pre-university programs, 93.1% in technical programs and 86.8% who opted for the Welcome and Integration session.

Regarding this question, it should be noted that the categories “much lower average” and “slightly below average” were grouped together since they were mentioned by very few students.

FIGURE 1
DISTRIBUTION OF BOYS AND GIRLS ACCORDING TO ANTICIPATED RESULTS FOR THE FIRST TRIMESTER AT CEGEP

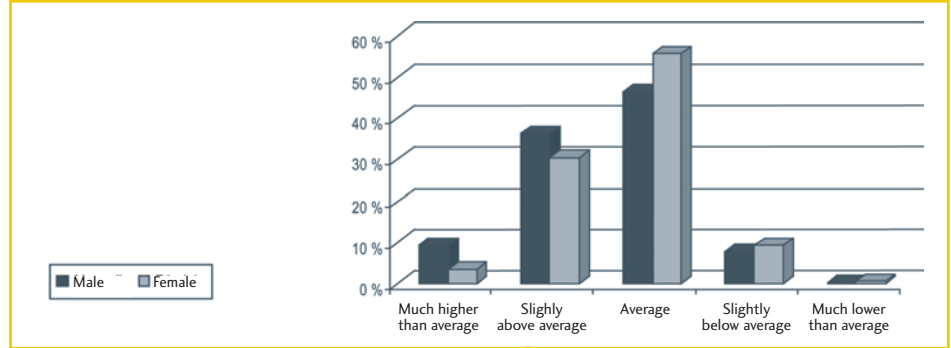
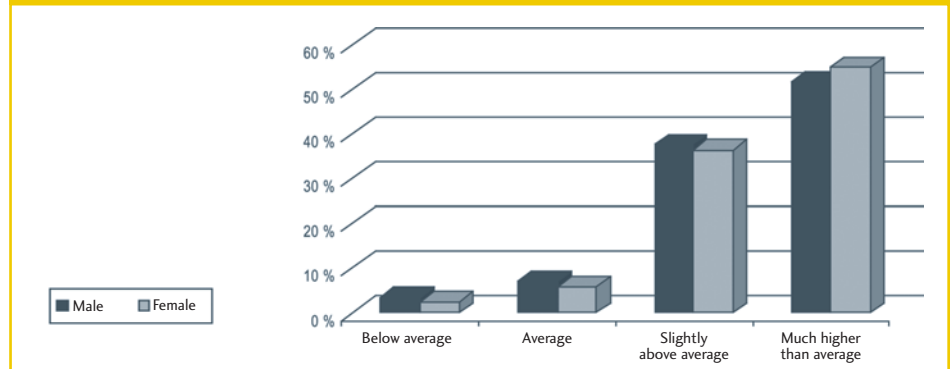


FIGURE 2
DISTRIBUTION OF BOYS AND GIRLS BASED ON THE AMOUNT OF WORK NEEDED TO ACHIEVE DESIRED RESULTS



Although students say they are ready to work harder at CEGEP, they readily acknowledge, on the whole, to working very little at secondary level. In our sample, almost 63% of boys and 40% of girls in Secondary 5 admit to spending less than three hours per week on school assignments. This jumps to 96% for boys and 69% for girls who spend less than six hours a week on assignments. These percentages are appreciably the same whether the students intend to continue their studies at CEGEP or not, but there are important differences depending on the program of study they have selected. Thus, students enrolled in Natural sciences are the ones who spend the most time on their school assignments; whereas those enrolled in Welcome and Integration sessions devote the least amount of time.

Regarding the expectations of students towards their results, here again we notice a significant difference based on the program selected: A similar proportion of students enrolled in Social sciences (50.8%) and Liberal Arts programs (54.7%) expect to get average results. In both cases (approximately 37%), fewer of them expect results slightly above or way above average than students enrolled in Natural sciences (61.6%). On the other hand, the latter are very conscious that they will have to work twice as hard to reach their desired performance levels, since close to 95% of them say they will have to work slightly harder or much harder than they did at secondary level.



A RELATIVELY POSITIVE PORTRAIT

On the whole, students have relatively positive expectations towards CEGEP (refer to table 1). Although they expect that courses and activities will be more difficult than in secondary, they also believe, especially boys, that these will be more interesting. They also believe that their new social environment will be as welcoming as secondary level was and, despite the fact that this belief is higher among girls, they all anticipate that they will be able to rely on the support of their professors as they did at secondary level. On the other hand, they are conscious that they will have to show a greater level of autonomy and that they (especially boys) will have greater difficulty in maintaining their level of motivation.

In addition, our results indicate many differences that relate to the program selected at CEGEP. Students having opted for a Welcome and Integration session expect to receive significantly less support from their professors than those enrolled in

TABLE 1 : AVERAGE SCORES* AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS ()** RELATIVE TO EXPECTATIONS
VIS-À-VIS CEGEP

	MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL
Increased difficulty of activities	4.56 (0.70)	4.62 (0.70)	4.59 (.67)
Less support from professors	3.02 (0.87)	2.90 (0.91)	2.95 (.89)
Keener interest	4.19 (0.88)	3.93 (0.90)	4.04 (.90)
Increased autonomy	4.49 (0.86)	4.40 (0.85)	4.44 (.85)
Less control over motivation	3.57 (0.85)	3.38 (0.88)	3.46 (.87)
More impersonal social environment	3.03 (0.80)	2.95 (0.81)	3.32 (.76)

TABLE 2 : AVERAGE SCORES* AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS ()** RELATIVE TO EXPECTATIONS***
VIS-À-VIS CEGEP

WELCOME AND INTEGRATION	TECHNICAL	PRE-UNIVERSITY TOTAL	SOCIAL SCIENCE	NATURAL SCIENCE	LEBERAL ARTS
4.67 (0.64)	4.64 (0.66)	4.57 (0.68)	4.47 (0.71)	4.76 (0.64)	4.53 (0.63)
3.12 (0.83)	2.83 (0.94)	2.98(0.87)	3.08 (0.87)	2.92 (0.87)	2.87 (0.84)
3.93 (0.91)	4.13 (0.93)	4.00 (0.88)	3.92 (0.89)	4.07 (0.85)	4.12 (0.87)
4.58 (0.94)	4.73 (0.96)	4.78 (0.89)	4.83 (0.88)	4.81 (0.87)	4.64 (0.94)
3.54 (0.77)	3.30 (0.87)	3.52 (0.87)	3.68 (0.88)	3.28 (0.83)	3.48 (0.83)
3.20 (0.72)	3.26 (0.78)	3.35 (0.74)	3.36 (0.73)	3.49 (0.70)	3.20 (0.78)

* Maximum 6.

** The standard deviation is a measure of data dispersion relative to the mean/average: the lower the variable, the more the data is grouped close to the average; the higher the variable, the more the data is dispersed.

*** Same expectations as described in Table 1.

Technical programs, whereas the latter do not perceive CEGEP as a place where there will be more distractions than in secondary, contrary to those who enrolled in pre-university training or in the Welcome and Integration session. For their part, students who chose Natural sciences tend to believe more strongly than do students of Social sciences or Liberal Arts that courses and assignments will be more difficult and that the environment will be less welcoming than in secondary. Students in Social sciences expect less support from their professors and less interesting courses than their colleagues in the other two pre-university programs. They also believe that there will be more distractions than students enrolled in Liberal Arts who in turn, expect more distractions than those enrolled in Natural Science.

Taken as a whole, the results of this study indicate that students who participated have a rather realistic vision and altogether positive approach to what awaits them at CEGEP. Indeed, there are many who believe their grades will be good, while being conscious that they will undoubtedly have to work harder to achieve them. Thus, while judging that courses and activities will be more difficult than at secondary, many expect to get results that are average or above average. They know that they will have to show greater autonomy but do not think that it will be more difficult to concentrate on their studies. It is often mentioned that part of the difficulties of first session students comes from the fact that they have not developed good work practices at secondary level. The students who were analyzed in our study were conscious that they would have to work harder at CEGEP; and even if they are voicing their intentions, well before their arrival at CEGEP, this appears to be a positive factor rather than a negative one.



On the whole, the mixture of positive expectations and awareness of possible difficulties expressed by young people corresponds to what certain authors consider to be an asset in the successful adaptation to a new educational environment (Wargo, 1999; Pancer, Hunsberger, Pratt, and Alisat, 2000).

FOLLOWING THESE STUDENTS AT CEGEP

This research will continue while these students are in their first year at College. Students who registered in Social sciences and Natural sciences in the four CEGEPs participating in the study will be asked once again to fill out questionnaires measuring their level of academic commitment, their motivational profile, and their perception of the new educational environment as well as the quality of their adaptation to college life.

This stage will allow us, among others, to compare their expectations towards college studies while they were in secondary and their current view of their new educational environment. Moreover, by comparing the college expectation profiles of those who succeed in integrating into their new environment with those who experience difficulties, we should be able to shed new light on the role of expectations in adapting to the transition from secondary to college. ♦

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