



DEALING WITH THE CLASSROOM GULF

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INTRODUCTION

This study examines the educational experience of at-risk students as they arrive at Cegep, presents a portrait of their educational culture, and suggests some ways that the gulf between the educational culture of the college and that of under-achieving students might be addressed. The study is 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 the student who was “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.

1. SOURCES OF DATA

The findings of the study are based on five sources of primary data: interviews with 48 underachieving students conducted over a three year period, an ethnographic report from two feeder high schools, four focus groups with scholarship students, interviews with fourteen teachers and a focus group with three non-teaching college professionals. The secondary source of data is the academic records of the bottom quintile for the A02 cohort and for the Sample48. Information has also been gleaned from personal visits to and/or extensive investigation of five secondary schools, colleges or universities with special programs for underachieving students. Finally, we have drawn both information and understanding from our “deep organic connection” with the institution, which includes an intimate knowledge of the Explorations program (a *session d’accueil et d’intégration*) at Vanier College.

Each of these sources has provided a particular view of the process by which an underachieving student adapts to the challenges of Cegep study and of the educational cultures which operate in post-secondary institutions. What follows are general conclusions which flow from these summaries and general recommendations based on them.

2. THE GULF

The study clearly delineates two educational cultures, what might be called, had Hugh McLennan’s coinage not already become clichéd, 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. 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, and graduates from Cegep in three or four years (in two and three year programs!).

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. Our informants from the institutional educational culture have enjoyed relatively comfortable and rewarding careers in the educational system. Teachers and professionals were found to be 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 in 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 format of college offerings provides very little “wobble room” for those students who want or need to carry on their responsible adult life while studying, i.e. to work and study at the same time.

In the autumn semester of 2005 at Vanier College, there were 962 “Review Boards”, i.e. students who failed to meet the minimum requirements to remain in college as a student in good standing. With a full-time student population of just over 5600 students, this number of failures, at 17% of the total student population, is frighteningly close to a quintile. Neither 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”. The intersection of these two cultures of education, then, is a quagmire of frustrations and disappointments on both sides of the gulf.

High school students in the two schools studied in 2004 showed an intense attachment to social life with peers at school and little interest in academic subjects. The teachers whom these students liked were those who respected them, focused on individual needs yet taught to the whole class, and were confident in their subject matter. 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 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 between childish ways and adult responsibilities.

Most of the sample of 48, who had graduated from high school with grade averages under 70%, 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. 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, again those who took a personal interest in them. Several described chaotic high school classes in which teachers addressed a captive audience of good students at the front of the room, while the bottom quintile (at least) languished in the back.

For these 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 deeply 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. Some have encountered exclusion, marginalization or racism, and several have lived in serious poverty most of their lives. Most of them work, many more than twelve hours a week. These students are usually living the full social and economic lives of young adults in addition to attending college full time. They are straining toward independence while still enjoying many privileges, but also some stigmas, of youth.

The educational culture of this bottom quintile is generally one governed by efficiency, i.e. maximum output for minimum input. 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. They sometimes come up against a personal “wall” of dissipation and indifference with respect to their studies, and when they do, either find it difficult to resurrect any commitment to school, or occasionally encounter an epiphany which turns them around toward a pattern of accomplishment. They 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 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.

It would be folly to suggest that, based on the results of this research, specific programmatic solutions could be recommended. However, certain patterns emerge in the contradictions between the institutional educational culture and that of the bottom quintile which 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.

3. 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, such as extended hours of paid work.

4. 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.

5. 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 their 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.

6. 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.

7. 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 and 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 uses teaching practices which are appropriate, conscious and coordinated.

8. 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 career 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. It should be noted that the student population at Vanier is highly heterogeneous, multi-ethnic and urban. Our students are approximately 40% anglophone, 40% allophone, and 20% francophone. A total of about 80 languages are spoken by our students. We are a rainbow of ethnicity with many skin colours and family origins 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 2006. 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.