

Actes du Congrès  
**COLLÈGES CÉLÉBRATIONS 92**  
Conference Proceedings



MONTRÉAL MAY 24 25 26 27 MAI 1992

**Reflections : Graduating Student Survey**  
**Seneca College of Applied Arts and Technology**

par

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This study attempted to elicit and examine student reflections in order to understand how they might be interpreted as guidelines for issues of attrition and retention as well as undertaking an analysis of how students perceived their success. Further, investigation of prioritizing and emphasis of response as regards attitudes towards retention and/or improvement of practices also served as a purpose in this study. To facilitate the reflective process, 1,051 graduating students were first asked demographic questions which provided a current profile of the community college population. They were then asked a series of questions which attempted to measure their levels of satisfaction with their respective programs, faculty and with college services. The students were also asked several questions which endeavored to measure whether or not their expectations had been met. It was anticipated that, by determining individual student's expectations, it might be possible to examine college, program and faculty efficacy.

While students hold idiosyncratic views, it was thought likely that common trends or factors might emerge which would account in part for their academic success. Conversely, it was hoped that possible mitigating factors which might place that success in jeopardy might be identified so that any such elements might be circumvented in the future. This study, therefore, sought to determine whether or not specific factors could be identified, isolated and examined as potential predictors of personal, social and organizational requisites for success.

The questions which were addressed in this study were twofold. First, are graduate reflections able to be elicited in a critical way in order to understand aspects of the dropout rate? In other words, is it possible to understand failure by examining success? Second, should graduate reflections be used? If so, might they also be used to understand, from a different perspective, specific program strengths and weaknesses, and how might this understanding lead to meaningful program change? It was also the intention of this study to examine to what extent Seneca College is meeting the needs of its student population.

It was anticipated that students would have expectations about their college experience and about teaching which might be idealized to some extent from former experiences. It was also anticipated that the faculty strike which occurred during 1989 might have an impact on the findings of this study to the extent that it was still fresh in the students' minds when they completed the survey.

It was further anticipated that students who responded very positively about their college experience might do so on the basis of singular episodes or relationships, while those who responded negatively might also do so on the basis of specific instances where they felt they had been treated unfairly. On balance, these issues appear to have been proportional in the findings.

The methodology used in this study was a combined qualitative/quantitative survey containing thirty-five questions related to how the college students viewed their experiences. The survey was designed in consultation with a focus group who made recommendations pertaining to content, layout, design and implementation. The focus group was adamant about the need to distribute the survey during the final semester of student study as opposed to a mailed survey after graduation. Clearly, the sample size or rate of return of a mailed instrument

would have been much smaller and the inclination of the participants to be completely candid might have been somewhat diminished after graduation. Also, the possibility of a halo effect from graduate reflections was far more likely over time. From that perspective, the findings of this study would appear to be sharply focused on those issues which the students felt were the most crucial.

The second reason for the chosen method and methodology had to do with the perception of the focus group that the college must be seen to be concerned about the opinions of its clients, in this case, the graduating classes of June 1990. The classroom visits bore this perception out, and many students who took part in the survey made a point of welcoming the opportunity to provide input. Similarly, the faculty who provided access to their classrooms were highly supportive of the study and expressed a strong interest in having access to the findings upon its completion.

All participants, directly or indirectly involved with the study, understood the intent and were welcoming of the opportunity to be involved. The Divisional Deans advised their respective personnel that the study was being conducted, while staff and faculty provided timetables, schedules and flexible access to the classrooms. The students themselves, upon hearing the rationale for the survey and being provided with any necessary clarification of individual questions, participated vigorously. The length of responses to the open-ended questions indicates a very conscientious attempt by the students to provide as much information as possible.

Inasmuch as eliciting reflections from respondents may mean understanding their collective experience (Kompf 1990), all of the students remained highly individualized by their observations. Some were highly eloquent, and volumes were spoken from a series of paragraphs which described tenacity, friendships, humanism, sadness, anger or frustration, humour and, ultimately, rites of passage which culminated in achievement. Many students were the first in their families to attain a college diploma, and great pride was expressed by the students in describing this achievement. The accomplishment of learning skills which prepared them directly for a career was also a major factor cited by the students which they felt was most significant. Sample comments from the students to the open-ended questions on the survey have been appended where appropriate, with minor editing of any remarks which might be deemed to be racist, sexist or slanderous.

### **Summary of Research Questions**

The questions which guided the methodology and methods in this study will structure this part of the summary.

Following the demographic questions, the students were asked whether or not their program of study had met their expectations. Seventy-six per cent of the respondents indicated that they were satisfied with their program of study, while 23% were dissatisfied.

Next, the students were asked whether or not they felt that the teaching faculty were able to communicate, encouraging, fair, flexible and available when needed. Notwithstanding the fact that this question was far too complex, in retrospect, the results indicate that 83.6% surveyed were satisfied with faculty, while 16.4% were not. The comments appended in the study which accompany this question reveal that a majority of respondents suggested that there is evidence of a clear lack of teacher training within the institution. Without the opportunities for formalized classroom training, it appears that many faculty are being left to their own devices in this critical area. Since adult students have their own unique learning styles and demands, it would seem prudent to afford professional development activities which would enhance both the faculty's teaching techniques and their overall approach to andragogical issues.

It is interesting to note that over 75% of the group surveyed held a job while attending Seneca College full time, working between 10 and 29 hours per week. This data reflects the changing profile of the Seneca student and the need for the institution to react accordingly. Again, the open-ended comments indicate a clear lack of cohesive action to address such issues as hours of operation, timetabling, faculty availability, etc.

Further, while 72.5% of the graduate students surveyed stated that Seneca had met their expectations and 72.3% felt that their program prepared them for a career, the majority qualified their answers with additional comments which suggested that there were many areas of improvement needed.

Next, 78.7% of the sample felt that there was an appropriate balance of theory and practical experience, although the comments appended to this question indicate that students felt that the practical experience had been the most useful and recommended increasing it.

A significant majority (87%) of graduates did not believe that their courses were too difficult, while 72.3% felt that their program had prepared them for a career.

Only 62.1% of the students felt that their workload was balanced and manageable, and many recommended curriculum revisions to prevent some semesters being heavily overloaded while others were exceptionally light.

The question, "What appealed to you the most?" produced interesting results, as did "What appealed to you the least?" in that faculty were cited on both. It would appear that faculty clearly had a significant impact on the respondents, both positive and negative. Again, the comments reflect the need for teacher training in the classroom. Eighty-three per cent of the respondents felt that Seneca was a good place to prepare for a career and 78.6% would recommend Seneca to a family member or to a friend.

Recommended improvements were heavily weighted in the areas of faculty training and curriculum revision, although it seems clear from the comments that the students are not questioning their teachers' grasp of content. Rather, it is the ability of the teacher to convey content that is constantly challenged. The community college system in Ontario has never provided a formalized, structured training program for its faculty, and since most instructors are hired directly from industry, few have teaching certification. While this may not have been

required when the colleges were first established, clearly the findings of this study would indicate that it is a serious shortfall in the eyes of the students. It is possible that many faculty would welcome a professional development program that would assist them in developing a variety of teaching strategies in the classroom in order to improve their efficacy.

When asked if their experience at Seneca College had led to positive changes in their lives, 70.7% responded positively, and referenced career preparation, friendships made, increased self-confidence and pride in having pursued higher education.

It is significant that 44.1% of the graduates surveyed seriously considered quitting their program at least once. While this may be, in part, a reflection of the faculty strike in 1989, the impact of that figure cannot be easily dismissed. Factors influencing the decision to remain included wanting the diploma, self-determination, family, friends, staff, faculty, administration as well as the strike ending.

Finally, the respondents advised future students to work hard, manage their time well, choose appropriate courses, and persevere because Seneca was a good college. On a slightly more disquieting note about 5% advised "don't go."

Aside from the reported findings, one major unanticipated outcome of this study is the actual experience of student reflection and the effect it seemed to have on all of the participants--students, staff and faculty. The process appeared to generate a certain degree of enthusiasm and excitement. Many students commented that they had never been asked for their opinion before and were very pleased to have been given the opportunity. Many recommended that the survey be implemented on an annual basis, so that the college could respond appropriately to their client base. Staff and faculty were also highly supportive of the process and were most welcoming, both in the classroom and later on, in attending seminars which presented the findings of the study. Faculty have also echoed the belief that a similar survey should be implemented on an annual or biannual basis.

Further afield, there appears to be interest in developing a similar instrument from the other community colleges in Ontario. Since several colleges have already co-operated in developing an entry survey for incoming students, it seems to make good sense to consider an exit survey which might be useful to the system and to the students it serves.

### **Implications for Practice**

The findings from this survey provide Seneca College with some specific recommendations from its clients, the students, pertaining to performance and recommendations for the future. Bearing in mind that the findings are based on research conducted with students who succeeded in their programs, it makes excellent sense to consider that their insights are more significant and useful than any other source we might consider. Therefore, we may be able to not only develop predictors for student success but also analyze in some detail what barriers exist which impede that success.

If the findings from the survey were taken and aligned with our current retention strategies, it may be possible to identify gaps which exist. The findings clearly demonstrate what needs to be improved upon as well as what is done satisfactorily; that information should provide the underpinnings for the development of a variety of strategies which may encourage student success.

With some refinements, it is possible and advisable that surveys of this type be incorporated as an ongoing tool to measure performance by community colleges in Ontario. Clearly, both the instrument and the process could conceivably provide the college system with an ongoing source of information and suggestions which might be of value for the future. The general findings indicate several issues worthy of attention, first as regards student services and issues of access. Second, and most importantly, the issue of teacher training seems to be a critical one from the perspective of the students who participated in this study. Since they have successfully completed their respective programs of study and are responding as graduating students, it is possible that they are the most qualified to comment on this aspect of the community college system.

### **Implications for Future Research**

Every organization is comprised of members. In the community college, the largest membership is the student body. As the client base of the college system, it makes sense to consult the students on a regular basis in order to obtain feedback pertaining to their opinions, impressions and recommendations for the future.

In this decade, it is evident that many progressive organizations will seek to engage their respective memberships in dialogue which will include expressions of opinion and recommendations for the future. In this way, the membership has a say, indeed, a partnership in the organization.

By inviting this kind of partnership, the organization can send a clear message back to its membership not only that their opinions are valuable and that they are competent to provide opinion, but also that the organization itself is accountable for the success of its clients - in this case, the students.