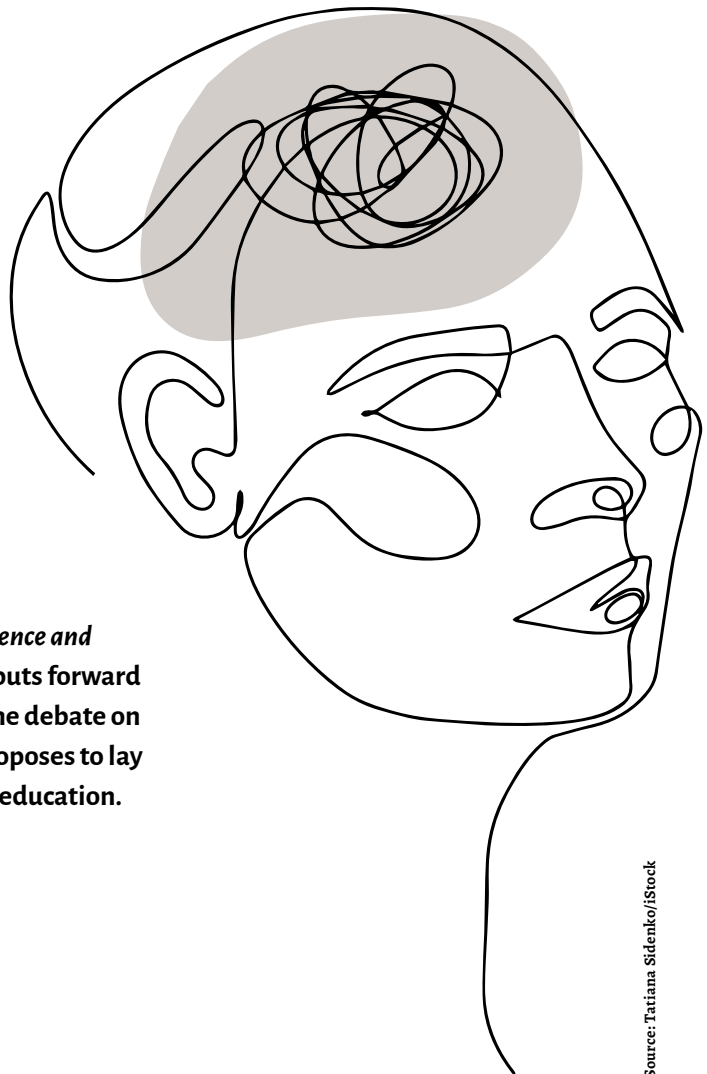


College Education: Educational Experience and New Realities

Katie Bérubé and Sophie Gosselin

What kinds of learning are required today to thrive as an individual and to participate in the society of today and tomorrow? How can the education system best enable the development of these essential skills? What is the potential for evolution in the organization of education in order to optimize its adequacy to current realities and to meet the needs of learners?

In its new brief *College Education: Educational Experience and New Realities*, the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation puts forward some answers to these questions that are driving the debate on the future of education and higher education. It proposes to lay the foundations of a vision for the future of college education.



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Setting the context

The Conseil supérieur de l'éducation (hereinafter referred to as the Conseil) is a government body that informs the Ministers of Education and Higher Education about the state and needs of education and advises them on all matters relating to education. It is composed of 22 people representing all levels and sectors of education and is supported by several committees and commissions, including the Commission de l'enseignement et de la recherche au collégial [Commission on College Teaching and Research, Ed.] (CERC), which has about 15 members, the majority of whom work in colleges. In 2022, the work of the CERC led the Conseil to publish two briefs for colleges: *Recognition of Acquired Competencies at the College Level: An Avenue to be Optimized and Promoted* and *College Education: Educational Experience and New Realities*. This article is a summary of the latter brief.¹

Factors of change to consider

Times are changing: student profiles and pathways are evolving, new societal trends are emerging. All of these factors are prompting college education to change, too.

Student profile and paths

The diversity of the student population poses challenges in many ways. It is becoming increasingly difficult to paint a typical picture of a college student, which refutes the idea that there is a typical pathway. These diverse characteristics translate into an ever-increasing diversity of expectations, needs and educational goals.

The extension of studies beyond their expected duration is now an inescapable reality at the college level. Yet the Conseil notes that the criterion of graduation within a predetermined time frame is still often used to judge the effectiveness of the college system. The Conseil believes that making decisions about success based primarily on standard indicators offers a simplistic view of reality and promotes the idea of a standard pathway as the norm.

The Conseil calls for a rethinking of the interpretation of the notion of student success at the college level: for example, a DCS is no less valid when it is obtained outside the prescribed time frame, especially if this pathway has made it possible to define a study project or a career path. It believes that greater consideration should be given to diversified pathways and reiterates the importance of the guidance function given to colleges to support students' career choices.

Societal trends affecting education

As student trajectories change, so does the world in which we live. Among the major movements taking place in society, the Conseil draws attention to those that call for reflection on the role of education today and in the future, such as the rise of digital technologies, climate change, or changing demographics and cultural benchmarks. The Conseil calls for recognition of the resonance of societal changes in Quebec college education. It observes that these changes are influencing study programs and the competencies to be mastered by graduates, and that some of them are also affecting the way

the education system carries out its functions or deploys its programs.

On the other hand, the education system has an influence on these trends insofar as it trains people. The student population is in symbiosis with this changing society. It embodies and propels the transformations as much as it must adapt to them by adopting new behaviours.

¹ Interested readers can view the full brief in French as well as an English summary [<https://www.cse.gouv.qc.ca/publications/experience-educative-nouvelles-realites>].

Anticipated training needs

Educational institutions have a responsibility to train people to be able to take these trends into account and to become agents of change to meet the complex challenges of the present. They are thus called upon to prepare individuals to participate fully in society. The last two decades have seen the emergence of a global movement that calls for "a new model of learning" (UNESCO, 2015, p. 1) based on questions such as:

- "What education do we need for the 21st century? What are the purposes of education in the current context of societal transformation? How should learning be organized?" (UNESCO, 2015, p. 3)
- What are the skills, knowledge, and attitudes required by individuals today to succeed in life and participate in building the world of tomorrow, and how can education systems support the acquisition of these skills? (OECD, 2018, p. 3)

Expanded training objectives

The Conseil notes a global trend toward a broad formulation of the purpose of education, with a particular emphasis on humanistic values. Several jurisdictions advocate, for example, that education should include elements such as the realization of the potential of individuals or the harmonious relationship of human beings with the planet, in keeping with the goals of sustainable development.

According to this vision, "the acquisition of relevant knowledge and the development of competencies

in the service of our common humanity [...] takes the debate on education beyond its utilitarian role in economic development" (UNESCO, 2015, p. 37). This reflection invites us to think of learning in an "open and flexible" perspective and as a process "that is both lifelong and life-wide: an approach that provides the opportunity for all to realize their potential for a sustainable future and a life of dignity" (UNESCO, 2015, p. 10). This process furthermore embraces all aspects of life, since it takes place not only formally, in schools and higher education, but also non-formally and informally, at home, in the community, and in the workplace (OECD, 2019, p. 4).

21st century skills

This vision promoted by international organizations is also reflected in an interest in general or transversal competencies. Although there is no unambiguous vocabulary for these so-called *21st century* competencies, a consensus is emerging on the importance of fostering their development. Among the competencies that make up this set, the Conseil notes in particular:

- digital skills
- citizenship and eco-citizenship
- intercultural skills related to living together
- critical thinking and complex problem solving
- creativity
- communication
- media literacy
- teamwork and collaboration
- human and social skills.

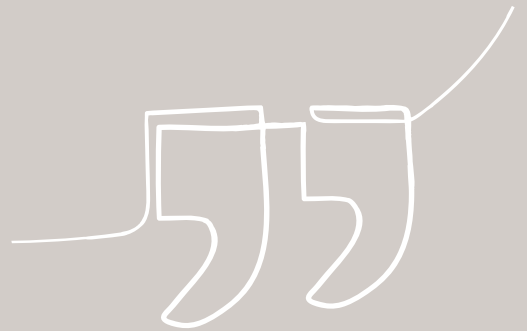
The main challenge is to ensure that these competencies are truly integrated into teaching and learning, but not as add-ons that can overload the programs of study. The Conseil advocates the formal integration of these competencies into programs of study and, to guide their inclusion, invites the Minister of Higher Education to establish a working committee to define a comprehensive exit profile for college students.

General culture and interdisciplinarity

One of the fundamental roles of educational institutions is to provide access to culture and knowledge. The Conseil considers it essential that education lead to the development of a solid general culture, in order to educate enlightened and open-minded citizens, capable of solving complex problems requiring the mobilization of vast knowledge. General culture is not limited to an accumulation of



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knowledge: the full perspective comes from the knowledge interrelationships. At the college level, the Conseil believes that culture is inherent in the foundation of the disciplines in addition to being the hallmark of general education. While recognizing the essential contribution of general education, the Conseil therefore tends to favour a contribution by all disciplines to the development of this culture from the perspective of a program approach and the shared responsibility of all components of the programs of study.

General knowledge is also a foundation for the development of 21st century skills. Individuals need tools to interpret, manage and connect knowledge. According to Singer, "it is first necessary to establish links between the elements of knowledge forming a 'raw material' [...], developed in separate disciplines, in order to access the relevant (interdisciplinary) knowledge needed to identify and solve problems" (Singer, 2020, p. 218, translated by the Conseil). The call for interconnections between knowledge and its use in solving complex problems is therefore also linked to a need for interdisciplinary training. Without breaking down the disciplinary structures that prevail in the organization of college education, the Conseil calls for an openness to decompartmentalization so as to introduce and experiment with interdisciplinary learning opportunities that allow individuals to develop complex thinking. The multidimensional problems that people will have to address in the future transcend disciplinary boundaries, and the education system will need to be "imbued with multidisciplinary thinking and study to solve global problems" (Jain, 2020, p. 32, translated by the Conseil).

Flexibility in training: a potential to be optimized

The Conseil believes that the current interest in increased flexibility in college education is part of a societal shift marked by the diversity of expectations and needs of student populations, the synergies between multiple learning sites, as well as the rapid evolution of digital technology. Its reflection on this topic is consistent with the Higher Education Academy's (2015) framework, which conceives

of flexibility as a way to empower the student population by providing choices about *how*, *what*, *when*, and *where* learning is achieved. Flexibility can thus be operationalized at different levels: for example, courses can be offered in person or at a distance, full-time or part-time, in regular, intensive, or summer sessions, in the classroom or workplace.

The Conseil believes that the introduction of more flexibility does not involve a complete break with the current college model. It advocates a progressive approach, integrating different flexibility options, while ensuring that learners are guided and supported in their decision-making. While flexibility allows for a better adaptation to student realities and needs and provides pathways to reintegration into higher education for those who are employed individuals (Martin, 2020), there are still many challenges to be overcome in order to ensure its implementation (for example, students must have the level of autonomy required to take part in decisions, information and support regarding the study options offered must be accessible to them, and the management of the options offered must not overburden the institutions).

The movement toward flexibility is already underway; the Conseil proposes that future actions go beyond reactivity to external pressures. Rather, it would like to see a proactive and creative approach to anticipating the adjustments that need to be made to education in line with the changes observed in today's society and in the realities of learners.

Elements of the administrative and regulatory framework in a state of flux

Paradoxically, the Conseil notes that college programs have become more rigid over time, reducing the range of choices available to students. Specialization profiles and pathways are of particular interest to those with more specific career choices. However, the area of exploration and the possibilities are limited for those in the process of defining their education project.

The aims, common competencies and goals of college education, which are components that are written into the first pages of the ministerial programs of study, would benefit from being more systematically addressed. For example, linking common competencies to objectives and standards across the programs would contribute to their development, which is currently based on educational intentions alone. The strengthening of general culture and interdisciplinarity should also be supported by the systematic integration of objectives into the programs of study and by taking advantage of the program approach.

As long as the obligations set out in the *College Education Regulations* (CER) are respected, the colleges have some latitude to adapt their programs to make them more flexible. Nevertheless, the Conseil considers that certain administrative and regulatory provisions concerning the organization of studies pose obstacles to the fluidity of student pathways. This is the case for the date set for dropping courses without penalty, the framework for part-time

education and the management of complementary course offerings.

Student perspective

For the Conseil, it was essential to enrich its reflection with a student perspective gathered through consultation. The purpose of this process was to gauge the importance attached to the development of certain competencies as well as the interest in the possibilities of adapting college education to new realities. In late fall 2020, 637 students attending a sample of colleges completed an online survey. A group interview with members of the Conseil's Comité interordres de la relève étudiante (CIRÉ) enhanced the results, which show a strong need for the development of broad 21st century skills related to the understanding of societal issues, as well as a more nuanced interest in flexible training options.

Among the statements proposed in the questionnaire, the educational goals considered most important are those focused on obtaining a diploma and qualifications: getting a diploma, improving my skills to access a better job, acquiring specialized knowledge in a field.

Respondents also wanted training to help them understand and deal with the following societal trends: mental health issues in the population, social inequalities, climate change and sustainable development, and the cultural diversity of populations. They also expressed a greater need for the development of skills related to autonomy, critical thinking, openness to intercultural differences, and communication. Among the skills acquired

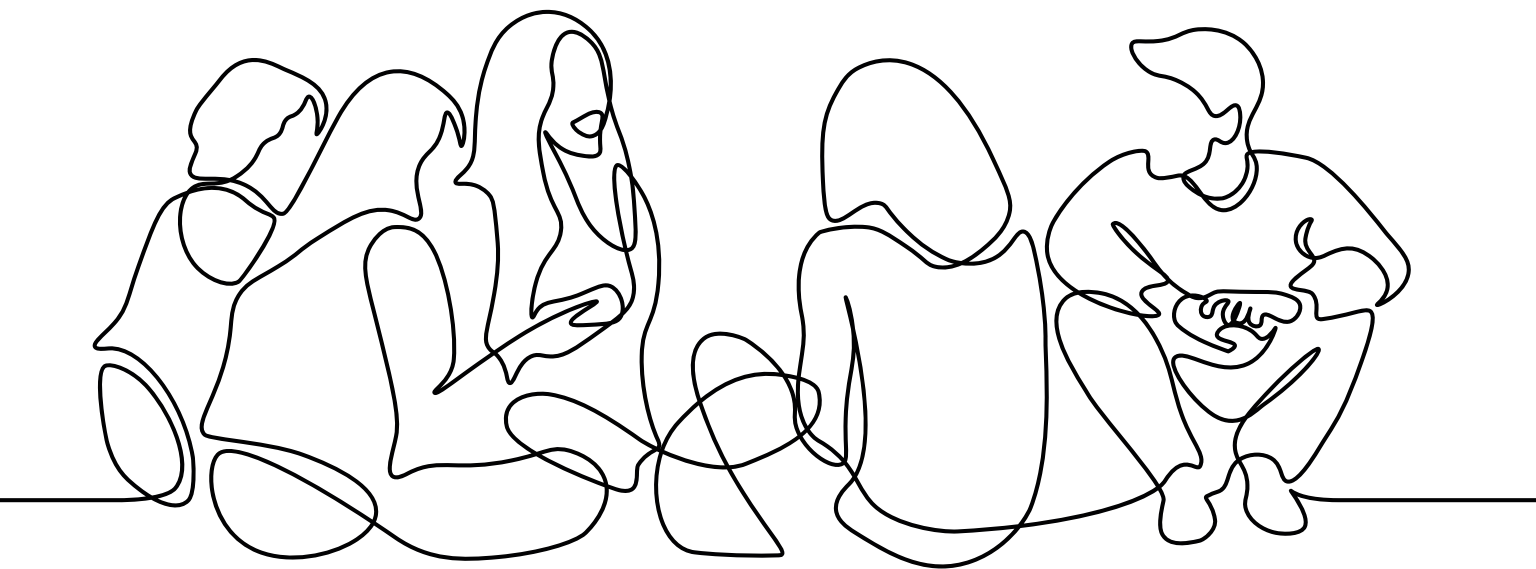
in high school that people would like to consolidate, those surveyed favoured mastery of second language skills.

With regard to educational flexibility, a large majority of respondents favour the organization of studies according to the modalities generally in force: two sessions followed full-time according to the usual schedule. However, these results must be interpreted with caution: they are coloured by the context that prevailed at the time of the consultation, when a large part of the student population was taking their classes at a distance in a context of upheaval and probably expressed a desire to return to a certain normality.

Nevertheless, more than half of the respondents are interested in training that takes advantage of professional environments (internships, work-based learning, work-study), as well as in hybrid training. More than half of the respondents would like to have more flexibility in the content of their training, for example, to be offered more courses to choose from in program-specific training or general education, or even to choose courses on an ad hoc basis without being enrolled in a specific program.

Forward-looking colleges

The Conseil points out that several initiatives to enhance the student experience outside the formal framework of programs of study and the classroom have already been implemented by the colleges, such as recognition of student involvement, an entrepreneurship support network, community involvement and closer ties with the scientific research community.



Source: Tetiana Garkusha/iStock

The Conseil encourages synergy between institutions to offer flexible education options in order to optimize deployment, and it maintains that support from the Ministry of Higher Education would be likely to stimulate practices in this regard. Increased networking between colleges and the sharing of expertise are key elements for dynamic training, with diversified possibilities adapted to student realities.

According to an analysis of their strategic plans, the colleges are proactive and alert to societal trends. They also demonstrate a willingness to support the development of 21st century skills and to strengthen the program of study approach as well as

general education. Nevertheless, their sensitivity does not always guarantee that their intentions will be translated into action. Questions remain about how to concretely respond to new needs within the current college structure. For this reason, systemic action at the level of management or departmental leadership would be required to support these institutional intentions.

Conclusion

The transformations of society and the changing realities of students are prompting educational institutions to imagine new ways of organizing and offering training. Through its brief, the Conseil wishes to stimulate broad

and forward-looking reflection on the subject and to lay the groundwork for a forward-looking vision of college education. Rethinking the college educational experience and ensuring that this vision is translated into innovative actions are collective responsibilities. These actions cannot be based on isolated initiatives alone; they require the mobilization of all stakeholders and systemic interventions to provide a relevant, rich and stimulating educational experience. The Conseil invites the members of the college community to take ownership of the recommendations in this brief, particularly those that challenge them, and to engage in a dialogue on how to implement them in their communities. ■

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