# Complementarity in Adversity: A Step Toward Success

Hélène Brassard, Florence Marcil, Marie-Ève Blackburn, Marco Gaudreault, Camélia Dubois-Bouchard and Benjamin Gallais

While it is recognized that parents are the primary influence in the lives of young people, it is possible to suggest that other significant adults also play a critical role in their development. Many individuals, such as family members, teachers, school staff, employers, you and us, play an important complementary role in the academic success and perseverance of college students, especially in a context of uncertainty and questioning of the established order. The research team at the Centre d'Étude des COnditions de vie et des BESoins de la population [Center for the Study of Living Conditions and Population Needs, Ed.] (ÉCOBES) has therefore looked at what students have learned about themselves in the context of the pandemic and has established courses of action related to education, social life and mental health that could be put in place to support the success and wellbeing of college students.
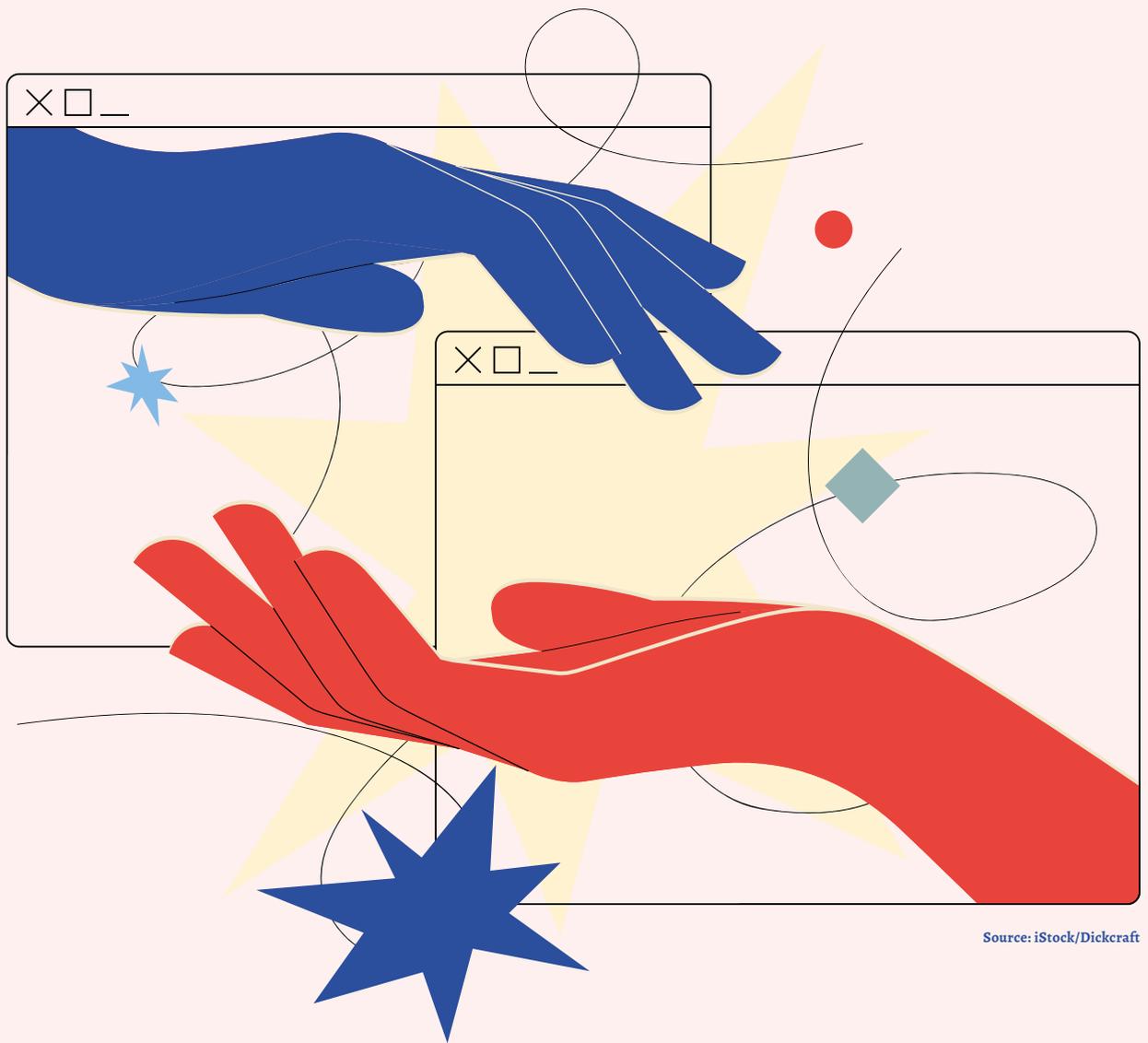
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Context

While a few hundred studies document the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and health measures on, among others, professional, financial, mental, and psychosocial environments (Epishin *et al.*, 2020), the literature is more limited regarding the positive or negative personal lessons that the student community may have learned in the pandemic context.

There is no doubt that the pandemic has resulted in significant changes in the daily lives of individuals and communities. This period served to reorganize teaching, and college teachers had to redesign their courses to fit an online format (Veilleux, Leblanc-Pageau & Lévesque, 2021). For college students, these changes affected how they went to school, educated themselves, worked, traveled, engaged in leisure activities, and interacted with others. The magnitude and radicalness of these changes, in addition to the speed with which they occurred, make them unique (Bergeron *et al.*, 2022; Maltais *et al.*, 2020). This adaptation forced students to deploy strategies to protect themselves from the negative consequences of stress on their physical and psychological health (Ferreri, 2021).

All of the changes brought about by the pandemic, in addition to all of the possible consequences, had a deleterious impact on the learning abilities and educational success of a portion of the college student population. For other students, these changes had less impact, either because of their autonomy or resilience, or because distance education better suited them (Gillis & Krull, 2020).

While experiencing so many changes in such a short period of time put a great deal of strain on students' coping skills, it is also possible to suggest that they learned something about themselves. In the context of the survey *Adaptation psychologique et adaptation aux études des étudiants collégiaux face à la crise de la COVID-19* [*Psychological and Academic Adjustment of College Students to the COVID-19 Crisis*, Ed.] (hereinafter referred to as *Adjustment to COVID-19*[1]), administered in November 2021, it seemed appropriate to ask the Quebec college student community what they had learned about themselves after dealing with the pandemic context for more than 18 months.

Table 1

Characteristics of respondents

Mean age		21,1 years (± 6,2)
Gender	Female	73,0 %
	Male	25,4 %
	Non-binary, gender fluid or two-spirited	1,6 %
Study program	Technical	52,0 %
	Pre-university	35,4 %
	Continuing education	7,6 %
	Springboard to a DCS	4,9 %

Methodology

We conducted a qualitative analysis as part of the *Adjustment to COVID-19* research project, which in 2021 was in its third data collection phase (phase 3). This analysis focuses only on the last open-ended question in the survey, "After more than 18 months in the pandemic, can you tell us what you have learned about yourself?"

Data collection took place between November 30 and December 21, 2021. The survey population included the entire student community of 18 colleges and 6 education centers in Quebec. The only inclusion criterion for responding to the survey was to be studying at one of these colleges at the time of data collection. Out of the 4,875 individuals who completed the survey, a total of 3,986 people provided a valid response to the open-ended question.

The adoption of an inductive approach was favoured since the emphasis was placed on lived experience, and the study then relied on a knowledge construction process (Denis, Guille-mette & Luckerhoff, 2019). This approach favours the understanding and deepening of perceptions and opinions in order to describe the reality of the student population and ultimately produce new knowledge (Blais & Martineau, 2006). The variety of responses, as well as the length of the testimonials received, which were often very personal, made it possible to describe what the student population learned about themselves during the pandemic.

The process of constructing the three major strands of lessons learned related to education was facilitated by the use of the NVivo software and by the richness of the testimonials collected. The findings presented in this article are examples of testimonials that frequently emerged among the student community as a whole and represent personal lessons learned about education that may have had important impacts on pedagogy. Three groups of testimonials are reported here: those directly related to education, social life and mental health.

How can we better support members of the college student community in their success based on what they have learned about themselves?

In the spirit that "it takes a village" and considering the importance of all stakeholders in the educational success of members of the college student community, the research team targeted all those potentially affected by the solutions to be developed. In order to promote the positive impact of research on learning and considering the heterogeneity of needs, the team first asked itself the question: "How can we support them and find solutions so that the entire college student community can evolve in an environment that is conducive to their full personal and academic development?" At the end of each theme, a section will present reflections and avenues for action regarding solutions that could be implemented collectively, thus promoting a common vision for the wellbeing of the student population.

Personal lessons learned about education

Ability to adjust

The first finding in response to the analysis concerns the connection between what members of the student community have learned personally and the school environment. The pandemic has had a profound impact on their daily academic and educational lives. Coping skills were noted as an area that was highly influenced by the changes brought about by the pandemic. Adjustability was, for some, a negative aspect, particularly in relation to adjusting to distance education methods as well as the organizational tools and resources necessary for the success of members of the college student community that may or may not have been available to them.

"I'd like to say I've learned to adjust, but not really; the pandemic was very hard for me and still is. I had a hard time adjusting to school at home and now I'm having a hard time adjusting to school in person." (Female, 19 years old, pre-university program)

There is a link here between adjustability and aspects related to school life, such as a marked difficulty in adjusting to online education as well as autonomy and time management. These aspects, respectively, influence the ability of youth to organize themselves effectively according to their academic and personal workload. Through the testimonials received in relation to autonomy and time management, we note a dissatisfaction with "traditional" and "lecture-based" approaches to teaching.

"I really appreciated the hybrid format of distance learning courses last year (once teachers had been able to adapt to distance learning) for the greater flexibility and freedom it gave me in my schedule and the time saved by traveling less. I think it's taken the edge off the traditional lecture-based teaching methods and accelerated the use of technology in the classroom." (Male, 46 years old, technical program)

Teaching methods

For some members of the student community, the education system has been a source of dissatisfaction. Indeed, the pandemic revealed that the teaching and evaluation methods as well as the "temporary" strategies put in place made it difficult to maximize learning retention. The analysis of the data shows that a significant portion of young people noticed a decrease in their motivation and concentration, which they believe is attributed to the new virtual educational experience. With online courses, there is also a propensity for procrastination given the greater autonomy and responsibilities that arise.
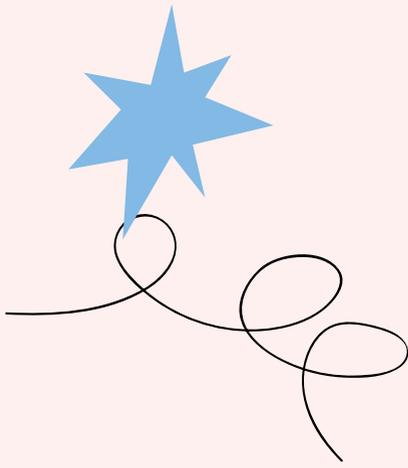
However, according to some students, this view of the education system and teaching methods is not all negative. On the contrary, several other young people had a rather positive view of the way their studies were unfolding. In this sense, some of them mentioned better quality support from the teaching staff, while others said that the acquisition of study strategies was better aligned with their needs and interests, for example the integration of new technologies in class. The testimonials received also open the way to atypical paths. Following the pandemic situation, some young people said that they had demonstrated perseverance, determination and an ability to adapt in their schooling, in addition to demonstrating an openness as to the path to take for their educational future. The importance of education and educational success remain priorities for many members of the student community.

"I learned that I was good at adjusting to exceptional situations like the pandemic. For example, I found new ways to get organized and maintain good grades in school." (Female, 20 years old, pre-university program)

Table 2

Courses of action based on lessons learned about education

- Beyond academic achievement, other aspects should be valued in students to highlight educational success, including competencies, work methods, and organization.

- In order to respect the rhythm of all students and to facilitate diversified study paths, part-time studies and lightened sessions are avenues to consider.

- College education requires a great deal of adjustability, and the strategies adopted by students are varied. In this context, it becomes even more essential to adopt an inclusive approach to teaching.

- Including the teaching of transversal competencies in the students' diary would provide them with better tools for organizing their work, for managing stress, and for dealing with their workload as students.

- Varying teaching modalities, between hybrid, face-to-face and online modes, would help foster the experience of the entire college student community and build on the skills developed in distance education.

- Considering that many members of the student community are questioning their academic and professional orientation, academic and professional guidance services would benefit from promoting their role and responsibilities, and services to students by meeting them in their environment (classroom, cafeteria, social center, etc.).

Personal lessons learned about social life

Need to socialize

In addition to what students have learned about themselves in terms of education, they have also learned about social life. A large number of young people reported, at the top of the list, their need to socialize with their classmates as well as with their social circle. In fact, this need was mostly expressed because they were no longer in contact with them as much as before the pandemic.

"I learned that I am a person who needs to be social a lot. In fact, as the pandemic led us to take classes online, I found that I really missed seeing my friends and colleagues and that was an issue." (Female, 18 years old, technical program)

It is possible to observe the importance of the school environment in the socialization and bonding of members of the college community. Many expressed the importance of social interactions on a daily basis. In this sense, the students share that isolation and online courses have restricted the creation of relationships while limiting access to their peers.

Conversely, others noted the fact that online education led to "hyperconnectivity." Several months of pandemic in addition to "hyperconnectivity" led members of the college student community to develop a genuine addiction to technology, still present to this day, whose effects are often detrimental to social relationships.

"Social media takes up a big chunk of our lives." (Female, 22 years old, technical program)

Finally, the social life of some members of the student community has also been positively affected by the guidance and support of loved ones. It is relevant to mention the desire to value the support of those around them.

Table 3

Courses of action based on lessons learned about social life

- Considering that young people need to socialize and that the school environment is a place where they maintain most of their social contacts, several avenues are possible, including fostering student collaboration, creating discussion groups, encouraging teamwork in the classroom, creating random teams and organizing social activities within the college environment.

- In order to better support the other members of the community and be present for one another, solutions to be implemented may include raising awareness, better equipping the college community and promoting the importance of listening and helping attitudes in addition to holding discussion groups.

- Since the use of screens is an important issue, several avenues are possible in order to make sensible use of them. First, we can reflect on our own use of screens and then act as role models and raise awareness of the potentially harmful effects of excessive screen use.

Personal lessons learned about mental health

Their mental health state

Several testimonials demonstrate that members of the college student community learned a great deal about the state of their mental health. A number of positive perspectives were gathered, including changes in feelings of self-confidence and positivism, as well as valuing mental health and seeking help. In addition, some of the testimonials reveal an improvement in mental health during the pandemic, due to a slower pace of life, time gained because of diminished travel, and more autonomy in managing schedules (Blackburn *et al.*, 2021).

"Honestly, my mental health was never better than during the pandemic. I was always zen, I didn't cry anymore, everything was really good! So, it's really society and school that make me so stressed all the time." (Female, 20 years old, technical program)

There are, however, also testimonials that tend toward the negative. Indeed, a few individuals mentioned having fragile mental health and a feeling of psychological distress exacerbated by the pandemic (Gallais *et al.*, 2021). They expressed feelings of mental instability, depression, stress or anxiety. The pressure and workload associated with school life were named as stress and anxiety factors for youth. For some, these factors even affected their relationships and plans for the future.

"I am very unstable mentally. I need psychological support and moral support. I've learned that I have a lot more anxiety than I thought I did and it's really interfering with my studies and my daily life." (Female, 19 years old, pre-university program)

Asking for help

Despite this rather negative view of mental health, seeking help and speaking out remain priorities for members of the college student community. For many, caring about their mental health brings a sense of confidence and a sense of self-efficacy. Indeed, going through such a crisis can lead to an awareness of one's strengths and resilience, and thus to a greater sense of competence and self-worth (Gallais *et al.*, 2022).

Table 4

Courses of action based on lessons learned about mental health

- Establishing clear evaluation methods, eliminating individual interpretations, dispersing evaluations, and balancing their weighting throughout the session are strategies that would decrease unnecessary sources of stress among members of the college student community.

- Offering mental health training to staff members, encouraging discussion, demystifying prejudices about these problems and raising awareness about the importance of seeking help, in addition to encouraging the deployment of recognized mental health tools and programs and maximizing the use of those in place, can be avenues for lifting the veil on the taboos surrounding mental health. They can also help establish a safe environment where young people can freely express their needs, fears and limits.

- One way to make the various services offered better known and more accessible to the members of the student community would be to promote them regularly in various ways (posters, discussions, etc.). It would also be beneficial for support staff to go and meet students several times a year in order to exchange with them and thus promote the recognition of the staff members.

Conclusion

Looking back at what members of the college student community learned about themselves during the first 18 months of the pandemic has allowed us to document their adaptation to different aspects. While many members of the college student community discovered positive aspects of themselves in the midst of adversity, the results and findings of this analysis have highlighted some of their sometimes glaring educational, social, and mental health needs. This study allows us to put into perspective the issues and lessons learned with regard to adjustability, autonomy and time management, difficulties with distance education, motivation, the need for socialization, support from family and friends, screen time, stress and anxiety of the student population. Let's collectively use these lessons learned in a pandemic situation to implement concrete actions leading to positive and sustainable changes in all college educational environments.

With this article, the research team aims to solicit all those closely or remotely involved with the student community to adjust or maintain their practice, to establish collaborations between individuals and services, and to work in complementarity in order to improve the academic life of Quebec's college students. This is an opportunity to reduce the expectations and the gap between the needs of the members of the student community and the actions implemented to meet them.[2] ▬

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[2] For more information on the study *Adaptation psychologique et adaptation aux études des étudiants collégiaux face à la crise de la COVID-19* [Psychological and Academic Adjustment of College Students to the COVID-19 Crisis, Ed.], see the following website (in French): [https://ecobes. cegepjonquiere.ca/adaptation-psychologique- et-adaptation-aux-etudes-des-etudiantes-colle- giaux-face-a-la-crise-de-la-covid-19.html].

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Hélène Brassard holds a master's degree in Social Work and has been a researcher at ÉCOBES – Recherche et transfert du Cégep de Jonquière since 2021. Her main research interests are in the fields of social psychology, violence in intimate relationships and sexualized violence. Her main expertise is in the design of knowledge transfer tools and the design of training strategies and materials.

helenebrassard@cegepjonquiere.ca

Florence Marcil is an undergraduate student at the Université du Québec à Chicoutimi (UQAC). She has been a research assistant at ÉCOBES since October 2021. She collaborates on several projects with the research team.

florencemarcil@cegepjonquiere.ca
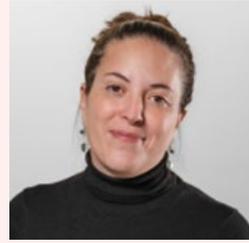
Marie-Ève Blackburn holds a doctorate in Applied Human Sciences and has been a senior researcher at ÉCOBES – Recherche et transfert du Cégep de Jonquière since 2003. She has also been the co-holder of the UQAC–Cégep de Jonquière Chair on the life and health of youth (VISAJ) since 2016.

marie-eveblackburn@cegepjonquiere.ca

Marco Gaudreault holds a master's degree in Sociology and is a senior researcher at ÉCOBES – Recherche et transfert du Cégep de Jonquière. His work focuses on the values and needs of young people in order to promote their educational success.

marcogaudreault@cegepjonquiere.ca

Camélia Dubois-Bouchard holds a master's degree in Biomedical Sciences and has been a researcher at ÉCOBES – Recherche et transfert and the coordinator of the UQAC-Cégep de Jonquière Chair on the life and health of youth (VISAJ) since 2017. Her expertise is mainly in project coordination and knowledge transfer.

cameliadubois@cegepjonquiere.ca

Benjamin Gallais (Ph.D. Psychology) is co-director of the l'Observatoire sur la santé mentale étudiante en enseignement supérieur [Observatory on Student Mental Health in Higher Education, Ed.] (MES) and a lecturer at UQAC. He joined ÉCOBES in 2018. He studies the mental health of the college student population and its impacts on educational success and retention as well as the psychosocial and sociocultural adjustment of international students, while evaluating the effectiveness of innovative interventions.

benjamingallais@cegepjonquiere.ca