

PRESS RELEASE



CÉGEP
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Understanding students at risk: A study at Vanier College

A newly released study that looks at the educational experience of at-risk students as they arrive at Cégep suggests ways to bridge the gulf between the culture of college education and that of under-achieving students. The study entitled “Complicated Lives” was conducted by Jock Mackay, Vanier College Professor of Sociology and Humanities, Doug Miller, a learning specialist in The Learning Centre and Guy Quinn, Professor of Physical Education and a founder of the Vanier Explorations Program.

From interviews they conducted with Cégep students as well as high school students and teachers, the authors found that the problem begins in high school where the students are not taught the skills they need to succeed in Cégep. The study points out that, “These students stumble into Cégep 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.”

To collect their data, the authors interviewed Vanier students who had graduated from high school with grade averages under 70%. “It’s the first time we hear about their lives and their difficulties, in their own words,” says one of the authors, Jock Mackay.

The picture that emerges is one of students who lead complicated lives. For most of these students school is primarily about a social life – they attend high school and college to be with their friends. They also have strong family ties and are in college to please their parents. Many are from immigrant families and have studied in more than one language. Often they have faced exclusion, marginalization or racism and have lived in serious poverty most of their lives. Furthermore many of these students have other responsibilities such as extended hours of paid work.

Unfortunately, students who would benefit from studying at a slower pace are penalized for not carrying full course loads. According to the authors of the study, “Those who must work while studying at a slower pace must pay tuition and often also accumulate significant debt while studying.”



So what can be done to help at-risk students succeed? First, “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,” state the authors.

They also suggest other changes, such as creating transitional programs to help weaker students move into Cegep; adopting changes in teaching styles that are more engaging for weak students; and promoting a better understanding of post-secondary study choices, including technology programs and the trades that can lead to rewarding careers. “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.”

The authors conclude that given the present demographic trends whereby colleges will become more multi-ethnic and varied as to the socio-economic origins of their students, the kind of complicated lives and difficulties they reveal in their study may well be shared by many other young Quebec students in the future.

The official release of the study will take place on Thursday May 10, from 4-6 PM, in the Learning Centre, Room B221 of the College.

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