

THE REALIZATION OF ASSESSMENTS OF SUPPORT MEASURES FOR SUCCESS

A STORY OF PRACTICE

In 2008 the *Commission d'évaluation de l'enseignement collégial* requested that colleges assess the effectiveness of their Strategic Plans (CEEC, 2007), including their Success Plans. This request provided the *Cégep du Vieux Montréal* with the opportunity to embark, starting in the fall, on a process for evaluating its Success Plan (2004-2009) just as it was coming to term.

Up to the end of 2009, a teacher and an educational advisor worked together to support teachers who were responsible for projects associated with measures for ensuring student success. At *Cégep du Vieux Montréal*, these measures consist mainly in providing release time from teaching tasks for teachers who submit success projects. These projects involve the *Centre d'aide en français*, the *Bureau d'aide à la réussite en sciences humaines*, certain targeted programs, etc., or timely projects designed to develop or to implement follow-up mechanisms for students experiencing difficulties, to rectify a situation, etc.

What follows constitutes a story of practice linked to the realization of assessments, over five years, of success support measures which have been undertaken at *Cégep du Vieux Montréal*.

EVALUATION OF SUPPORT MEASURES: HOW DID WE PROCEED?

Every year, *Tables de concertation* around a theme are organized in order to bring together college interveners who are directly involved with the success file (some sixty people in all: teachers, professionals, management personnel, etc.) including those who are responsible for projects of support for success. The themes addressed between 2007 and 2009 had to do with various elements: the need to properly identify the problematic issues related to each support measure; the importance of there being a tight cohesion between the issues identified in a project, the expected results and the means chosen to achieve them; the ways to evaluate the implementation of support measures as well as their effectiveness¹.



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The *Table de concertation* of January 2009 was the occasion for undertaking the assessment of projects of support for success. These project assessments were to cover the previous five years, since the Success Plan, the implementation and effectiveness of which the college was evaluating, covered the period from 2004 to 2009.

In order to support the teachers who were project leaders in the carrying out of their assessments, a form and a guide were created and submitted at the time of the *Table de concertation*. This four-and-a-half-page form was for the presentation of the intended project (program, department or discipline; year of financing; person in charge of follow-up; etc.) and it contained spaces reserved for the description of five elements:

- the state of the situation and the particular problematic issues;
- the general objectives and the expected results;
- the description and the evaluation of the activities that were planned and carried out;
- the results obtained in the project and their effects on success;
- some avenues for an eventual continuation of the project.

Since the number of characters used to complete the form was limited, the answers could not exceed the size of the text box for each section. This constraint enabled those in charge to produce a text that was short and concise. As for the guide, it was enlightening for the project leaders in their report-writing work. The five themes to be tackled were illustrated in it by a number of questions leading project leaders to draw up a clear synthesis of the evolution of the project over the years and to evaluate the impact: on student success, of the project in general, and of the support measures in particular.

As we mentioned earlier, the task of supporting project leaders in the writing of their assessments was shared between an educational advisor and a teacher who worked together during the entire process.

¹ Monique Dupuis, an educational advisor who is now retired, was at the heart of the development of the success file until 2009. The assessment carried out in 2009 brought to an end a process undertaken two years earlier using tools provided by *Carrefour de la réussite: Conditions for Effectiveness of a Support Measure* (April 2005) and *General Process for Evaluating a Support Measure* (March 2006).



Thus, from January to June 2009, the educational advisor and the teacher who were charged with providing the support gathered, read, commented on and analysed all the annual work plans and assessments. While some project leaders filled out the form themselves, others provided the relevant information to the advisor or the teacher, entrusting them to fill out the form. There were multiple formulas, depending on the project leaders, since the process was flexible. Generally, there was a lot of back and forth between project leaders, the teacher or the educational advisor, the information technician, the analyst, the management person in charge of the success file, etc. In a general way, the entire community, at one point or another, was able to participate in or contribute to the writing of the project assessments, since all of these were submitted at departmental meetings or to program committees, in order to be adopted.

WHAT DID OUR EVALUATIONS OF SUPPORT MEASURES FOR SUCCESS TEACH US?

The findings that follow, together with the suggestions for action, were included in the report submitted to the *Commission d'évaluation de l'enseignement collégial*². Even though they are the result of an evaluation conducted in one particular establishment, these findings and suggestions for action will no doubt find an echo in other colleges where similar issues may be observed.

Project leaders feel isolated

The people in charge of support for success often mentioned feeling isolated. Many of them would like to share their experiences with others in the same position, to find support, to develop professionally, etc.

In light of this finding, it seems desirable to create a venue for exchanges that foster the development of a culture of support for learning and a vocabulary that is common to the community, in order to facilitate exchanges (for instance, the terms 'tutoring', or 'mentoring' have different meanings for different project leaders).

Those in charge need simple tools for accounting for their actions

Overall, too few elements are being recorded by project leaders, and these sorts of practices vary considerably. Some project leaders have no information at all on the students they are helping; they are always on the go, they respond to immediate

needs, do not take notes, etc.; while others compile data using computer tools, they know the characteristics of the students they are dealing with and the reasons for the consultation, they follow up on students' success in courses for which they asked for help, etc.

The year 2010-2011 will give us the time to produce tools for compiling information on students' needs, on the rate of usage of the measures, on the type of support provided by the person in charge, etc. These tools will make it easier to know and to compile information regarding interventions and they will also facilitate the measurement of their impact.

Work plans and assessments are not updated

Since certain measures are recurrent, project leaders tend to present, year after year, the same work plans and the same assessments. This situation can be explained by the fact that (1) the assessments are written at the end of the winter session, a time when project leaders are very busy, and (2) the work plans for the coming year are submitted before the assessments for the year in progress. So, on one hand, those in charge do not take into account the variation in the data over time, as if the situation did not ever evolve; while on the other hand, those in charge do not use the assessments to verify the data on which their projects – and therefore the problem associated with the success of the students – are based.

Updated, every year, the work plans for the projects could cover a three-year horizon in order to take more account of the variables linked to the targeted problematic issues. The assessments, which would continue to be done annually, would then be written based on the most recent quantitative and qualitative data available. Also, a job description for the position of the person in charge of ensuring student success as well as some training could be offered. In addition, increased pedagogical supervision could guide project leaders in their interventions and could allow them to schedule a specific amount of time to evaluate the project and the success of the students who have been helped.

The evaluation of support measures for student success is difficult

All in all, the evaluation of a support measure concerns the capacity of a project to respond to a problem (of success, of persistence, of orientation, etc.) or to rectify a situation (improvement in training).

² This report is available on the website of the *Cégep du Vieux Montréal*. [<http://www.cvm.qc.ca/cegep/apropos/planreussite/Pages/index.aspx>]



On the form, the leaders of projects of support for success have generally had positive things to say when it comes to the evaluation of their projects. Their evaluations have often been based on impressions, intuitions, emails received from students, etc. For certain measures, by using quantitative indicators, it is in fact possible to observe that the success of students has an increased rate of success in a course or in a program, retention rate from one session to the next, etc. However, in most cases, it has not been possible for either the educational advisor or the teacher in charge of support to arrive at the same findings as those responsible for success. The global statistical data do not make it possible to see clear signs of improvement.

As we have already mentioned, those in charge are often on the go and few of them take the time to record data on the assistance they provide to students (name, type of help provided, etc.). These teachers nevertheless remain convinced that they are improving the success of students because they respond to their requests. The success of the project does not rest therefore on the academic success of the students, but on the response provided to their needs (guidance, organization of time, psychological support, etc.).

In this context, a person from the outside has no choice other than to take the word of the people in charge, to have confidence in their intuitions. However, in order to have a substantiated assessment of the success of a project, it is necessary for it to be based on the compilation beforehand of information concerning the students who have been helped. Unfortunately, many find it to be “bureaucratic” to compile data and they usually evoke a lack of time to explain the absence of such data. However, those who do compile data have integrated this exercise into their practice.

More than a question of time, it seems that this exercise is a matter of reflex, organization and conviction. A job description for the person in charge of success, relevant training, and increased pedagogical supervision – methods that we recommended earlier for updating plans and assessments – could help those in charge of supporting success to better appreciate the necessity of compiling data and of being inspired by the methods used by their colleagues for doing so.

Many project leaders seem to find it difficult to define their roles in the psychological support to offer to students

The role of those in charge of success would benefit by being better defined, since the psychological support provided to

students sometimes seems to be overrepresented in their interventions. In fact, many of them say that students consult them regularly for problems having to do with relationships, mental health, etc., and that this support monopolizes a large part of their time and their energy, all the more so since this type of support actually requires the services of other college professionals. On the opposite side of the issue, certain project leaders feel ill at ease when they are confronted with the personal problems of the students. Indeed, the difficulty lies in finding a happy medium that takes into account the fact that the obstacles to success are by nature diverse, tied to the lives of the students, and not only to learning difficulties.

An organizational chart, by function and by person, would help to clarify the roles of each with regard to the students and to inform all the personnel of the resources available at the college. An intervention plan could also be established in collaboration with the student, the Student Integration Assistance Department, Student Services (psychologists in particular), as is the case at the elementary and secondary levels.

Those in charge intervene with individuals but not with groups

Very often, the objectives that the people in charge set out in their work plans are overly ambitious. As a result, it does not seem to be realistic for teachers who are seldom released from their teaching (for instance, one day a week) to expect an increase in the success rate of an entire program. Those in charge of supporting success respond to the needs of students, that is, of people with unique characteristics. Generally, the assistance provided is on an individual basis.

In certain cases, the other teachers in the same program do not feel very concerned about their students' problems with success and they leave it up to the person in charge of supporting the success project to respond to the needs of those experiencing difficulties. In other cases, all the teachers consider student success to be a collective responsibility that should be shared. In all cases, the type of support provided by the person in charge of programs supporting success must be well defined and proportional to the amount of release time allotted to them.

CONCLUSION

Six months after the beginning of the process, the assessments of the 18 projects of support for success were completed. Of course each assessment is unique and is based on more or



less precise data. But each project was observed closely by the people concerned and by the educational advisor or the teacher taking on the support, in such a way that, for each of the assessments, positive elements as well as areas for improvement were identified and these should serve as important guidelines for the development of upcoming assessments.

The collaboration between an educational advisor and a teacher, for its part, proved to be both original and enriching, each one complementing the other. Thanks to the teacher's experience on the ground, thanks to the educational advisor's experience in research and due to their teamwork, they were able to offer a form of support that was appropriate for each of the project leaders.

In this experience all was not perfect however. For instance, the form had the advantage of providing all respondents with the same amount of space to explain their projects, but this was a headache for those who wanted to include tables or to adjust the page layout... In addition, although the content of the assessments was not a revelation to the teachers, the process of evaluation was. Thus, with a few exceptions, it was truly Theme 4 on the form, namely "Results obtained by the project and their effects on success" that proved to be the most difficult to write up.

Without creating an uprising in favour of evaluation in the college, the process contributed to a collective awareness concerning the necessity to proceed to the establishment of a rigorous assessment of each support measure that has been put in place. In this regard, this story of practice which we are sharing with interveners from other colleges cannot be concluded without thanking all those who contributed, from near or from far, to this process at our establishment. ♦

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