

PUTTING RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE: PASSION AND VITALITY*

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Within the framework of this file on the history of college research, we felt it essential to include the views of a person who has exercised the dual role of teacher and researcher since the creation of CEGEPs.

Catherine Fichten is a Psychology teacher at Dawson College as well as a seasoned and prolific researcher who has experienced the recent evolution in research from within the college network. She fields questions from Sébastien Piché and Fanny Kingsbury on her personal journey as a researcher.



Catherine FICHTEN is passionate about research. Holder of a doctorate in Psychology, she is a teacher in the Psychology Department at Dawson College and an Associate Professor in the Department of Psychiatry at McGill University. She also codirects the Adaptech Research Network in addition to doing research working at the Jewish General Hospital in Montreal.

FANNY K. AND SÉBASTIEN P. :

When and how did you begin your career as a researcher?

CATHERINE FICHTEN :

It all began at Dawson College in 1969 on the very day that the institution opened its doors. I was 20 years old. In those days, there was no such thing as college research; but I was in Psychology, a discipline that is very much based on research. So, it wasn't long before I was doing research, while teaching at the same time. My mother was my research assistant and we used the Psychology Laboratory at the college, during the summer, to do our computations! Needless to say, my research was not funded in those days. Nevertheless, I still managed to have my results published.

Why did you start doing research in the first place?

cf Because I love to do research. Honestly, I cannot imagine teaching

my discipline without contributing to it. For me, research is vital. It has always been of utmost importance in my career, even though I have not always been actively involved in it. After teaching for a few years, I became department chair and I was forced to abandon research at that time. To broaden my horizons, I subsequently left teaching and administrative tasks to pursue doctoral studies in Clinical Psychology. When I returned to teaching after obtaining my doctorate, it took me just one year to realize that I was not doing research anymore, that I was no longer contributing to my discipline. At the same time I also became aware that I was teaching with the psychology textbook in hand, a far cry from reality! So I decided to return to Clinical Psychology and research. This was in 1979, a period when it was difficult to do research. Funding organizations did not yet know about CEGEPs, or college researchers for that matter, so you

had to be attached to a university or be part of a university research team in order to obtain funding. Otherwise, you conducted your research during the summer or over the weekend. There was nothing for college researchers.

How were you able to eventually get funding for your research?

cf In 1982, I read an advertisement in a newspaper inviting readers to contact the *Fonds pour la formation des chercheurs et l'aide à la recherche* (FCAR), an organization offering college researchers a program called ACSAIR (*Aide aux chercheurs de collège ou sans affiliation institutionnelle reconnue*). I immediately applied for funding and obtained a first grant from the Québec government. This is how my career as a funded researcher began, with a break from my teaching functions. This was a huge step forward: I finally had some time to devote to research!



When it comes to research, time is not a luxury. It is a necessity! You know, research is a field where the rich get richer and the poor are excluded. If you do not publish your work, you do not get new funding; if you do not receive new funding, you do not publish; and that leaves us with no time... and basically nothing. I feel that I have been privileged and lucky.

After receiving funding from the Québec government you managed to get funding from the federal government. Was this difficult to obtain?

cf To receive federal research funds, you must have a good publication record. The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) has always welcomed college researchers. It is, in fact, the only federal funding organization that allows college researchers to apply for funds as principal investigator and not as part of a university research team. For me, it is imperative to share any scientific research I am doing and I have always published my results. So, I had enough publications in my CV to obtain my first SSHRC grant.

How hard is it to get research results published?

cf It is definitely easier for Anglophones than for Francophones: Anglophones have access to all the publications in the United States and in Canada. When I want to publish my results in French, I have access to 3 journals instead of 30.

What importance do you give to scientific articles and to popular science articles? And are these two types of publications of equal importance?

cf One of my research topics deals with the factors that influence the success

of college and university students with disabilities. This is a field of applied research in the sense that I not only want to develop new knowledge on the subject, I also want to promote concrete change in the field. In light of this research objective, I am very interested in popularizing science. However, in my work on sleep disorders and insomnia, I am trying to reach a public consisting mainly of other professionals in the field, peers who read scientific journals. For this type of research, I do not feel the same need to write popular science articles.

When it comes to research, time is not a luxury. It is a necessity!

Before obtaining your own research funding, you were part of other research teams. Can you share some of that experience?

cf Before the early eighties, my only hope for doing funded research was to join other people who had received a research grant. To obtain my doctorate in Clinical Psychology, I had to complete an internship and this involved a session at the Jewish General Hospital in Montréal. After obtaining my doctorate, the people at this hospital invited me to return, asked me to see a few patients and asked me to join their applied research program. So, while remaining at Dawson College, I was able to return to the Hospital and we began to do research first on sexuality and sex therapy, then on sleep and insomnia. Presently, we are doing research in behavioural medicine mainly dealing with sleep, obstructive sleep apnea, etc. Since the beginning of our work, whether it be research on sexuality or sleep, we seem to consistently find ourselves in the bedroom!

In 1996, you set up an applied research centre called the Adaptech Research Network at Dawson College. How did you manage to create this centre and what purpose does it serve?

cf I was already conducting research on discrimination towards people with disabilities when I became interested in the attitudes of college teachers and students toward students with disabilities. During a research interview, a teacher told me about a situation he had experienced. Before the start of a class, a blind student walked into the classroom. As the student stumbled around bumping into the furniture trying to find a free seat, the teacher had no idea what to do. He hesitated to make his presence known to the student for fear of embarrassing him. This anecdote revealed to me that teachers, just like students, were unsure about how to behave toward students with disabilities: what to say, what to do, how to react. After doing some research on the subject, I felt the need to give back to the community that had participated in the study and to share the results of my studies with teachers and students with disabilities. So, by collecting funds from various sources, we were able to set up the Adaptech Research Network.

I codirect the Adaptech Research Network with Jennison Asuncion and Maria Barile, two former Dawson College students who now hold Master's degrees. This network brings together a team of researchers, students and consumers. Its mission is to conduct research on the use of adaptive computer technologies as well as other computer and information technologies by students with disabilities in Canadian colleges and universities. We are located at



Dawson College and we are funded by provincial and federal organizations. A pan-Canadian bilingual advisory committee guides us in our work. Our purpose is to provide empirical information in order to facilitate decision-making and to ensure that the policies, software and equipment in place in the various milieus reflect the real needs and concerns of the individuals involved.

This is how students learn the real process of research — because I have them participate in all aspects [...].

What impact has your research had on your teaching?

cf My work on insomnia has had a direct impact on my teaching. I work with students in Psychology who are already interested in this discipline. I can talk to them about the research in which I am currently participating, ask them to read our articles and give me their feedback; I have them point out any errors we may be committing, and suggest ways of improving our research practices. My research on sleep is very useful in class because I can talk to students about methodology and the results of several studies that are not yet published. This makes a huge difference because I can bring the discipline to life for students. My work has also shown me that universal design in education is likely to benefit students both with and without disabilities. For example, some years ago, one of my students was profoundly deaf. To allow her to read my lips, I learned to teach facing my students instead of facing the blackboard! Like any number of teachers, I was in the habit of teaching

by writing on the blackboard and talking at the same time. However this is totally ineffective for a student who reads lips: I had to face this student so she could read my lips. By becoming aware of this need, I abandoned the blackboard and learned to use an overhead and a multimedia projector, which not only enabled me to see how all my students react to what I am saying, but also to adjust my teaching in response to their reactions. Since then, I tend to respond to my students' needs rather than those of the blackboard!

Do you think there could be a link between your own dual status of researcher/teacher and the emergence of scientific careers among your students?

cf Of course! At Dawson College, I teach Psychology to students who have an interest in the discipline. Over the years, I have invited many of them to work with me on my research projects during the summer and on a part-time basis during the school year. This is how students learn the real process of research — because I have them participate in all aspects: from developing the protocol to the interpretation of results and their dissemination in written and verbal form, from selecting measurement tools, to recruiting participants and analyzing results.

Can you name some of the people or organizations that have had the most significant impact on your career as a researcher?

cf Bruno Geslain, a former research and professional development coordinator at Dawson College, is the one person who has had the most positive influence on my career

as a researcher because he has always stood up for research activities being conducted in colleges.

Being involved in grant evaluation committees for research projects by peers has also helped a great deal by contributing to the refinement of my skills as a researcher. However, as you know, part of a university professor's workload includes participating in these types of committees, which is not the case for college teachers. This is very time-consuming and I cannot do it when I am teaching full-time. This is what I mean when I say that in research the rich get richer. If I am released from teaching, I can serve on peer review committees for granting organizations; and if I am a part of these peer committees, I become a better researcher, I can submit better applications for funding, I remain informed about research opportunities, and my career as a researcher develops accordingly.

My position as an Associate Professor in the Psychiatry Department of McGill University gives me access to all the online scientific journals and resources available at the library, a precious asset indeed.

Thanks to this position, I can also make the most of McGill University's expertise when applying for funding and I can take advantage of the expensive research software packages that the University places at its teachers' disposal.

This position does not give me an additional salary — over the years I have received salary slips totalling \$0.00 — however, it does enable me to take advantage of resources to which I would not otherwise have access.



Beyond your own journey as a researcher, what stands out in your mind as being the most significant event in the history of college research?

cf In my opinion there were three major events. Two are positive: the advent of the ACSAIR program and the creation of the *Association pour la recherche au collégial* (ARC). On the negative side of things, I have to mention the abolition of the “*banque des 150 ETC*” which gave college people time to do research.

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Sébastien PICHÉ is a History teacher at Cégep régional de Lanaudière à L'Assomption. He is also in charge of the history project on college research directed by ARC (*Association pour la recherche au collégial*). It is in this capacity that he participated in this interview.

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In addition to teaching at Dawson College, you codirect the Adaptech Research Network and you do research at the Jewish General Hospital. How do you manage to reconcile all these activities?

cf Ah, that is the big question! I love what I do, so I work hard, including summers, weekends and evenings, just like I did back in the seventies. But thanks to the funding that I now receive, my mother is no longer my main research assistant!

Many readers out there are probably interested in doing research. What would you say are the essential characteristics of a researcher?

cf Certain traits are a must: a love for doing research, the ability not to be discouraged by rejections from funding organizations and journal editorial committees and the courage not to give up when you encounter your first obstacles. It is particularly important to review and revise your manuscripts and rejected applications and to resubmit them.

My motto: third time is the charm. ◀