# DEVELOPING A REFERENCE MODEL FOR SUPPORTING STUDENTS

**RICHARD MOISAN**
Educational Advisor
*Cégep de Sherbrooke*

More than ten years ago, the *Cégep de Sherbrooke* adopted a measure for supporting student success that consists of releasing teachers from part of their teaching workload in each program of study and to entrust them with the role of being responsible for support services for students.

Halfway through the implementation of the Success Plan 2005-2009, an assessment of this measure brought out several observations: the type of support offered to students often takes divergent paths depending on the program of study; the role of the person responsible for support services is perceived and experienced differently from one program to another, from one person to another; the targeted students and the type of difficulties being supported vary considerably; the measures put in place to support students in difficulty are of uneven quality; the various interveners are not very familiar with their roles and their respective fields of activity; support services for students can become the business of a single person rather than being a matter of concerted effort with the other interveners in the program. This assessment also made it possible to identify some very positive elements. The measure gave rise to the development of interesting and innovative practices in the programs of study, and having an official spokesperson acting as the person responsible for supporting the students in a program favours concerted action and better student follow-up.

At the same time as this assessment was being carried out, those responsible for support services were expressing that there are needs that justify the fact that support services for the students in the programs should be the subject of more definitive guidelines, such as: specifying the expectations of the office of the Dean of Studies with regard to support services; providing a more detailed job description for the position of the person responsible for support services as it relates to the positions of teachers and those providing individual pedagogical assistance; having support regarding various aspects of the support services; being better informed about the resource people who are available at the CEGEP; and having the possibility to share their respective practices with each other. In short, what they were requesting is increased support in their roles of being responsible for the student support services.

To follow up on these different observations, the *Cégep de Sherbrooke* decided to adopt a reference model[1] in the matter of support services for students for their 31 programs of study. The modeling therefore had to provide specifics on the way the support services should be structured and marked out at the CEGEP, all the while allowing each program of study to adapt its actions according to its particular issues relating to success and persistence.

## METHODOLOGICAL CHOICES AND THEIR JUSTIFICATIONS

As the educational advisor responsible for this project, I joined forces with two teachers with several years of experience as the person responsible for support services, one in the pre-university sector and the other in the technical sector[2]. Together we worked through all the stages of the development of the model. From the beginning, the choice was to define the model based on the points of consensus that were emanating from the different practices being carried out in the field. The practices we sought were those that favoured concerted action by the interveners and that had one or more positive effects

[1] To find out more about the reference model and its components, about the data collected and the analysis conducted, see the *Cégep de Sherbrooke* website and access the *Réussite éducative* section. A final report describes in detail the process that gave birth to the model. This report is also available through the *Centre de documentation collégiale*, in hard copy or electronic form.

[2] Jean Fradette, mathematics teacher and person responsible for support services in Natural Science, and Susie Lépine, teacher and person responsible for support services in Animal Health Techniques.

concerning support for students. The intention that justified this methodological choice was based on the importance of interveners being able to relate to the model.

Data collection was carried out in several ways: an exhaustive survey of the literature on the subject of success and of support services at *Cégep de Sherbrooke* and elsewhere (among others, thanks to the meta-research by Barbeau, 2007); an inventory of support practices in each program of study; questionnaires, individual interviews and discussion groups that made it possible to identify the perceptions of those responsible for support services, of teachers, of professionals, and of management personnel; a meeting with a group composed both of students who have benefited from support measures and of students who had been encouraged by the support services staff in their program to take advantage of the support services, but who decided not to do so.

> *[...] the measure gave rise to the development of interesting and innovative practices in the programs of study; having an official spokesperson [...] favours concerted action and better student follow-up.*

The data collected was used to portray the actual situation and to have a clear idea of the desired situation in the CEGEP. Thus, it was the analysis of these data that enabled us to define the model project. It would have been easy to stop at this stage, but our concern to work with interveners in the field led us to put in place a crucial step, that of the validation of the model.

Therefore, a mode of validation based on the principles of action research was introduced. In this spirit, seven programs of study were used. The choice of these programs was made in such a way as to ensure that different realities were represented: programs welcoming a small and a large number of students; programs with a strong majority of female students, a strong majority of male students and mixed; programs in the pre-university sector (3) and in the technical sector (4); the presence of the different families of programs.

The person responsible for support services, the coordinator of the program committee, as well as a teacher from the first year of each of the seven programs were asked to comment on the guidelines established by our team, to verify their clarity, their applicability and their potential for being adapted to the respective programs of study. Furthermore, a group of experts was formed representing all interveners associated with student support services in the CEGEP. It had the same responsibility as the representatives for the seven programs,

but by having a critical eye within the scope of their respective fields of activity. The coordinator of the general education committee at the CEGEP was part of this group of experts, as was the Dean of Studies.

For an entire year, all these interveners commented on the various parts of the model. Our team had to meet regularly with the representatives of the programs of study and the group of experts in order to collect their comments, to reach a consensus as needed and to modify the initial project. The General Education Committee was also solicited on more specific subjects, for example on the choice of orientation and on the role of the interveners. Whenever we noticed a serious gap in viewpoints on a subject, a meeting with representatives of the seven programs and the committee of experts was organized. From time to time, we also met with people who had special expertise in the CEGEP in order to get their opinions.

These methodological choices resulted in extending the duration of this process such that it stretched over a two-year period. However, in view of the consensus we reached on the final product, it was well worth the effort: the objectives of presenting a model that elicits general support and to which the interveners can relate were achieved.

### ◗ THE CONCEPT OF A REFERENCE MODEL AND THE COMPONENTS SELECTED

While modelling the support system, our team pursued the objective of developing a guide that marks out the support services in the programs of study and that explicitly defines the different components together with their functional links. The reference model is a guide that specifies the elements with which the programs of study must comply. It also determines which decisions should be the responsibility of the programs, the people who should make them and the framework within which they should be made. The model therefore has as its consequences the reframing of some support practices and the confirming of others.

The components defined in the model are: the sphere of activity of the system of support services; the orientations of support services on a per program basis; the targeted student population; the interventions to focus on; the roles of the various interveners and the collaborative links between them; the action plan (support services plan) for each program; the evaluation of the impact of actions undertaken; the profile of the person responsible for support services; and the factors which are helpful in the implementation of the system of support services.

All these elements form a coherent whole and become the frame of reference for structuring the support services in each of the programs of study. Each part of the model provides an answer to one or several issues that the early findings and the data collection allowed us to identify in a precise manner. While explaining briefly the main components of the model, we will highlight these issues.

## Issues associated
### WITH THE DEFINITION OF THE SUPPORT SYSTEM

The first component of the model defines what we mean by the expression "support system by program of study". We had to specify the sphere of activity of the support services on a per program basis as well as the interveners involved because the practices surveyed revealed that the presence of a person responsible for support services in a program of study could have a negative impact, such as a tendency to quickly delegate to this person the tasks associated with student support services. An inverse tendency could also be observed, namely that the person responsible for support services might decide to work in isolation and to go it alone with regard to supporting students. In both these cases, it is the issue of concerted action that is in question, because student support is not experienced as a system in which several interveners work in complementary ways to help students succeed. This first element therefore helps to determine a systemic vision of the support services in a program of study.

It also seemed necessary to us to survey the definitions of certain key concepts and to make choices among them. For example, some people were dealing with the subject of success in an academic perspective, while others were speaking more broadly, from an educative perspective. So we did a survey on the perceptions CEGEP interveners had on their visions of success, deciding ultimately to work with a broader vision of success and to make it one of the orientations of the model. This orientation is in keeping with the perception that is generally expressed by the students, that is widely documented among others in a memorandum from the *Conseil supérieur de l'éducation* (1995) and that is in the research report of Rivière and collab. (1997).

We also had to make a choice as to the meaning to give to the concept of support. A survey of the literature enabled us to identify three tendencies: personal support for students, the organization of extra-curricular activities and following up on students who do not respect established rules. The meeting with students and several statements from those responsible for support services led us to observe that students generally attribute to support services a meaning of control and

organization, a perception stemming from the reality they experienced in secondary school. An analysis of the actions identified in the support services plans of CEGEP programs brought out the fact that these three realities were present, although in an uneven way depending on the program, and that the reference model ought to adopt a clear definition of support services. It was the document entitled *Enseigner au collégial… Portrait de la profession* (*Comité patronal de négociation des collèges*, 2008) that gave us the best definition of support both in and out of class and which also corresponded best to our research aims, namely to support individual students in difficulty or potentially in difficulty, and therefore to put the accent on personal support for students. This choice has a major impact on the model, particularly when it comes to identifying the student population to target and to determining which interventions to emphasize. It provides a clear answer with regard to which interventions should or should not be part of the support services plan. For example, it becomes difficult to justify the relevance of organizing an activity that is strictly social in character as a support services intervention if we do not count it among specific actions aimed at preventing difficulties of integration.

## Issues associated
### WITH THE DEFINITION OF FORMAL ORIENTATIONS

It also seemed necessary to us to provide, throughout the model, some formal orientations. During the data collection, we noted that the absence of explicit orientations with regard to support services could be one factor that favoured the disparity in practices. The personal views of each person were more likely to influence action than institutional viewpoints which were not very precise in matters of support services. Admittedly, the Strategic Plan and the Success Plan of the CEGEP established orientations for student success and the methods to emphasize. However, we came to realize that ownership of these orientations by interveners in the field was rather weak, and therefore had little influence. The interveners have clearly requested to be able to ground their actions in well-defined orientations. In this respect, there were therefore two issues: to provide explicit orientations on student support services that are shared by all and then to ensure the subsequent appropriation of these in the field.

## Issues associated
### WITH THE CHOICE OF THE STUDENT POPULATION TO TARGET AND THE INTERVENTIONS TO EMPHASIZE

As for the student population and the interventions to emphasize, several issues were at stake. The most important was certainly to define what we mean by a student in difficulty.

One common practice in programs of study was to limit the action to the difficulties of integration and adaptation of first-year students. This had as a consequence the setting up of a support system specific to first-year students and the structuring of nothing in a formal way for second and third-year students who might experience difficulties that could impact their scholastic achievement or progress. The consensus we reached was therefore to determine that the priority of our support services model is support for students in difficulty or potentially in difficulty in a program by means of interventions performed in and out of class, either by the teacher or the person responsible for support services or the person providing individual pedagogical support, and to the extent that students were willing to help themselves within the limit of existing resources.

In addition, two other issues were, first to ensure that the supportive interventions were indeed aimed at the students that we wanted to reach, that is students experiencing problems and, second, to lead them to take advantage of the support that was being offered to them. By making an inventory of best practices we were able to propose ways for the programs to achieve better results. The reference model therefore defined 21 characteristics that favour the success of an intervention and that relate to the intervener, the student, the context or the content of the intervention. Table 1 presents a few of these characteristics.

| TABLE 1 – SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF SUCCESSFUL INTERVENTION |
|---|
| **CHARACTERISTICS ASSOCIATED WITH THE INTERVENER** |
| **Adoption of a Proactive Attitude** |
| Initiate situations, call upon the students, reach out to them, go where they are, avoid situations of waiting, of passive or indirect invitation. Accept the fact that 'the ball is in your court' in terms of initiative. |
| **Choosing a Credible, Confident and Convincing Intervener** |
| It is an advantage if the people who promote or organize an activity are little known by the students, ideally if they are appreciated by them and have credibility with them. These people must themselves believe in what they are offering and know how to sell their product well. |
| **CHARACTERISTICS ASSOCIATED WITH THE STUDENT** |
| **Empowering Students** |
| Aim for the empowerment of students rather than the use of rewards or sanctions that affect their real motivation to participate. It is up to the students to reward or punish themselves; we should not do it for them. However, there is nothing wrong with congratulating them and valuing engagement. |

| CHARACTERISTICS ASSOCIATED WITH THE CONTEXT OF THE INTERVENTION |
|---|
| **Students Already Assembled and Present** |
| Take advantage of situations where the students are in class, are assembled, are on site, or have a free period between two courses, either to initiate a meeting or to promote an activity or to carry out an activity. |
| **Promptness of the intervention** |
| When faced with situations that are problematic, or potentially so, it is more effective to intervene quickly with the students rather than to wait for the situation to deteriorate and the problem to escalate. |
| **CHARACTERISTICS ASSOCIATED WITH THE CONTENT OF THE INTERVENTION** |
| **Explicit Referral** |
| In situations where students are advised to meet another resource person, it is important to be very explicit: provide precise contact information, hand out a flyer, a business card, offer to make a call then and there or to go there immediately, and explain where to go. |

The model also proposes a series of interventions aimed at preventing academic problems, at screening students at risk, at providing support for these students or referring them to specialized resources, and, finally, at ensuring that there is follow-up with students as well as with the interveners. It is up to the programs to establish their priorities. However, they have the obligation to have an action plan for facilitating the integration of students who have recently arrived in the program and in the college.

## Issues associated
### WITH THE ROLES OF THE INTERVENERS AND WITH THE LINKS BETWEEN THEM

Before the development of the reference model, all the interveners defined their roles based on their own views of support, or they conformed with the practices already in place. It was the same for the links between interveners. For some, these links were frequent and flowing, for others, they were totally nonexistent. There was therefore an important issue related to concerted action. Our team needed to make explicit the roles and responsibilities of each intervener towards the students and to specify the nature of the links between the interveners. Who does what? When do the people responsible for support services or for individual pedagogical support take over? It is this part on the links between interveners that helped to ensure the complementarity of their actions.

A major issue was also to describe the responsibilities of the person responsible for support services. If we wanted to offer guidelines for their practices, we needed to do a job description
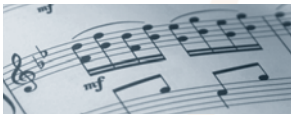
for this position as there was no official document describing what the "person responsible for support services" does. Our team therefore described the role of the person responsible for support services as follows:

> The person responsible for support services has a role of coordination and of concerted action with regard to the support service interventions in a program. This person is in the best position to collect and transmit information among interveners, as much regarding screening as for follow-up purposes. This person is also the main link with the various interveners who provide support for the students and the teachers. The role of this person also includes intervening with students, within the limit of his/her own personal aptitudes and according to established practices in the program. Finally, the person responsible for support services must respond to the students' requests for support and must intervene when them when their difficulties are affecting several courses in the program.

The teacher, the person responsible for support services as well as the person providing individual pedagogical assistance can now refer to a synthesis document that defines their roles and responsibilities. For example, in Table 2 we present an excerpt from the synthesis document on teachers' responsibilities. The example chosen concerns their responsibilities with regard to screening students in difficulty or potentially in difficulty.

| TABLE 2 – TEACHERS' RESPONSIBILITIES REGARDING SCREENING |
|---|
| **RESPONSIBILITIES TOWARDS THE STUDENTS** |
| • To identify the students who are experiencing academic difficulties based on assignments, tests, questions asked, etc.; |
| • To help their students to determine the causes of their academic difficulties to the extent that they are ready and willing to do so. |
| **RESPONSIBILITIES TOWARDS THE INTERVENERS** |
| • To inform the people responsible for support services so that they can have access to certain information (school results, significant absences, attitude, etc.) thereby facilitating the screening of students who are potentially at risk; |
| • To transmit all relevant comments that could favour the detection of problematic situations; |
| • To participate in support services meetings or, at the very least, to contribute to the effectiveness of such meetings in order to screen students in difficulty or potentially in difficulty. |

The links between the programs and the teachers in general education were established by insisting on the responsibility to help those responsible for providing support services in the screening of students at risk. Every teacher in general education has access to the contact information of the person responsible for support services in each program and is invited to communicate with this person whenever they judge it to be necessary.

**Issues associated**
*WITH THE PROFILE OF THE PERSON RESPONSIBLE FOR SUPPORT SERVICES*

The selection of the person responsible for support services is made during the distribution of tasks in the departments of specialized training. The resources allotted vary between .05 ETC and .35 ETC, depending on the size of the program. The choice of this teacher involves an important issue which is to ensure that the person who will hold this position makes this choice knowingly. It is for this reason that our model describes some of the different skills that can be useful to a person responsible for support services. The model established seven criteria that our team considers to be beneficial for this work: belief in the general orientations of the system of support, relationship skills and an attitude of professional commitment, an aptitude for screening, openness to having an unusual schedule, knowledge of the milieu, teaching a first-year course, and having completed their professional integration.

For this component, it is certainly not our intention to be directive or to impose a specific method for departments to follow when distributing tasks. This component aims to inform and to guide in order to avoid, for example, that the person responsible for support services be a teacher who has just been hired and who is not yet familiar with the workings of the institution.

**Issues associated**
*WITH THE SUPPORT SERVICES PLANS OF INDIVIDUAL PROGRAMS*

One important issue was related to the writing of rigorous support services plans for each program, to the mechanics for appropriating these plans by the program committees and by the administration as well as to the distribution of these plans within the program. It was also necessary in order to offset the widespread perception that the development of a support services plan was simply an administrative move with which it was necessary to comply.

The analysis also gave our team the opportunity to define another important issue: the balance of actions taken. For example, some support plans only provided activities designed to prevent difficulties, without specifying the type of support to give to students when these difficulties appear. The model

therefore included the notion that a support plan must meet certain criteria in order to guarantee a minimum balance between prevention, screening, support and follow-up.

It is the program committee that was deemed to be the appropriate forum for discussion and decision-making having to do with the support services plan. In addition, in order to support a long-term vision and to minimize the time spent on administrative tasks, the support services plans will henceforth be developed for a two-year period.

◗ **FACTORS FAVOURING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE MODEL**

This reference model would not be complete if it did not specify certain conditions that facilitate its implementation. It was very easy to identify factors favouring the introduction of the model. These helpful factors fall under six categories:

- An organizational context that is favourable to support services (adequate release time for the person responsible for support services, clear procedures, schedules that permit meetings with students and concerted action by interveners, stability of existing staff);
- Meeting places and physical proximity of interveners in the support services system;
- Availability of adequate tools for interveners;
- Use of computers as a tool for screening, communication and concerted action;
- Factors relating to interveners in the support services system (availability, ethics, concern for keeping up to date, supportive attitudes);
- Collaborative attitudes of students.

The first five categories were the subject of a series of recommendations. It was based on these that an Action Plan for implementing a support services system program-by-program was developed, one that identifies the people responsible for putting each recommendation into practice and specifies a timeline for doing so.

◗ **DISTRIBUTION, IMPLEMENTATION AND FOLLOW-UP OF THE MODEL**

Before implementing this model, our efforts were directed toward distributing it among concerned interveners, and a tour of the departments enabled us to reach the teachers. More explicit presentations were made for the people responsible for support services and program committee coordinators. We also met with management personnel and professional staff members. The model was introduced in the fall of 2010, after support activities had been put into place, with one specifically targeting the development of the support plan. Other means of support are anticipated during the gradual implementation of the model.

◗ **INITIAL OBSERVATIONS ON THE IMPACT OF THE MODEL**

To conclude, here are some of the positive effects we have observed since the recent introduction of the model:

- The role of the person responsible for support services is more clearly defined and better understood;
- A reframing of the interventions to be carried out in order of priority is under way;
- The support for programs is better structured and activities are offered at key moments;
- The objectives of the support services plans are more targeted and will be easier to measure;
- The adoption of support services plans was the subject of discussions and it was the program committees that appropriated them;
- The people responsible for support services now solicit in a more spontaneous way the help of educational advisors who are responsible for the success file.

In spite of these initial positive indications, there remains a risk: after a certain amount of time and due to the turnover of the personnel associated with support services, this model could fall by the wayside and problems of disparity in practices could surface once again. The major challenge will be therefore to maintain a constant monitoring of the milieu in order to ensure that each of the components of the model remains at the centre of support services concerns. This is therefore a file to be followed closely. ◗

*BIBLIOGRAPHY*

BARBEAU, D. (2007). *Interventions pédagogiques et réussite au cégep*. Québec: Presses de l'Université Laval and ARC, 426 p.

COMITÉ PATRONAL DE NÉGOCIATION DES COLLÈGES (CPNC) (2008). *Enseigner au collégial... Portrait de la profession*. Étude du comité paritaire, March 2008, 72 p.

CONSEIL SUPÉRIEUR DE L'ÉDUCATION (1995). *Des conditions de réussite au collégial. Réflexions à partir de points de vue étudiants*, Avis au ministre de l'Éducation, Sainte-Foy, Conseil supérieur de l'éducation, 124 p.

RIVIÈRE, B. and collab. (1997). *Les cégépiens et leurs conceptions de la réussite*, Tome 1. Research report, Montréal, Collège de Rosemont, 290 p.

Richard MOISAN has been teaching at *Cégep de Sherbrooke* for 21 years in *Techniques d'éducation à l'enfance* (Early Childhood Education). He has held the position of Educational Advisor for the past several years. He is also the local *PERFORMA* representative and serves as a resource person for *MIPEC*.

richard.moisan@cegepsherbrooke.qc.ca