

SUPPORTING THE CONSTRUCTION OF A PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY



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Upon entering college, many cégep students have only the foggiest notion of the possible choices pertaining to university studies. Few of them have made any headway in choosing their future career. This vocational indecision can lead to loss of motivation for collegial studies. In light of this, the major principles underlying career orientation are of keen interest to us all. What are these principles?

IDENTIFYING WITH A PROFESSION

Schools, making use of an orientation approach, help students build an identity and develop vocational maturity. In college, this can take the form of a concerted group of activities and services that are both structured and integrated to the study program. In this context, career counselling is no longer considered a simple intervention by a professional. Rather it presents itself as an educational process centered on the building of a personal and professional identity in students.

The philosophy underlying the use of an orientation approach leads us take a closer look at student vocational indecision, particularly for students who live in remote regions with no university close by. Although some of these students may consider university studies to be a long way off, others do not even relate to the subject. In addition, many students with cégep diplomas return to their respective region de-motivated by their initial university session, due to their isolation from home and the fact of being enrolled in an impersonal mega-university ... all of which can affect their academic performance.

A PROJECT REQUIRING A CONCERTED EFFORT

It is important for collaboration within and among cégeps; a concerted effort to work together on a common vision, to intervene and have an impact in helping undecided students embark on a process of integration and involvement in their professional development. This common approach calls on the entire organization and involves several interveners who play a role in the integration and intervention process.

KNOW YOURSELF BEFORE YOU CHOOSE

To begin with, it is very important that students be aware of their own motivations concerning the possible professions in their field of studies. At the same time, the various teaching programs and departments must allow and support student vocational supervision, in order to enable them to make an enlightened choice for a university course that is specifically suited to them. Consequently, the role of the department and, more particularly that of the teaching body, is not limited to teaching a disciplinary content, but must also ensure student transition towards university choices.

The guidance counsellor also plays a role in vocational support by contributing his expertise in career counselling. It is worthwhile to intervene with new students during their first session, using tests to identify some of their personal characteristics. This stage is important because it enables the student and the advisor to establish a student profile, whether done in group meetings or individually. Once the profile is established, it is easier to intervene in student motivation and fields of interest.

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EXPLORE THE WORLD OF PROFESSIONS

It is up to the interveners at collegial level to make sure students are in touch with reality, as regards university studies and potential career options available to the various programs. To do this, professors can make presentations in class on topics like the labour market, job perspectives, the criteria and personality traits required to embrace a given profession, etc.

These presentations however remain theoretical and only cover a part of the global reality of these work fields. To examine the different professional options more closely,



we can offer the students the opportunity to assist and meet interveners in that professional field. This contact is often a triggering mechanism for certain students. It enables them, by listening to specialists, to see and imagine themselves (or not) working in the profession.

These activities make it possible to achieve two interrelated objectives simultaneously. The first one has to do with enabling students in need to undertake an individual process with the guidance counsellor and clarify their choice of university program. At the same time, students can explore the world of different professions and the realities of the labour market in order to consolidate their choice.

► CAREER ORIENTATION IN THE FIELD

At Cégep de Baie-Comeau, this process takes place over three sessions for Humanities students and involves the participation of several interveners.

STUDENT PROFILE

To begin with, the guidance counsellor at the cégep intervenes with new Political Science students in the second week of courses. The first stage of the intervention consists of having the students pass the GROUPE test, a tool that measures certain personal characteristics such as preferred activities, personality traits, values, and fields of interest. Then, a second meeting with the group takes place for a general interpretation of test results. Following the announcement of results, students are invited to pursue their reflection further by consulting the guidance counsellor individually in order to complete their profile, a key tool in the decision process.

CHOOSING A CAREER

When it comes to choosing a career, students often only have a vague idea of professions related to Humanities. For example, Baie-Comeau has no university in the city or close by. Cégep students are therefore rarely in contact with university students who could provide them with a real picture of studies and where the different programs may lead.

In a subsequent stage, with the student profiles in hand, professors in the department undertake a series of classroom presentations dealing with the characteristics required to practice a given profession (generally the most popular and in-demand professions), the job perspectives for this profession and the required personality traits, specified by the REPERES software program. The targeted professions are selected by the students themselves (psychologist, elementary school teacher, lawyer, and historian, for example). The presentations often raise a number of questions as to what university studies are required to practice the profession. In addition to being informative, these presentations also have the advantage of stimulating student reflection on the profession in question.

In the Political Science course offered in the first session, presentations often take the form of a questionnaire game dealing with student prejudices and perceptions regarding the disciplines presented. The demystifying of these fields of study comes later.

To better delineate their career choice, students in the Humanities program (and in other college programs) are given the chance to assist and meet interveners in the field. During periods when students are available, labour market specialists provide valuable information on their profession. These meetings often take the form of discussions in small groups. For example, a psychologist, an elementary school teacher and a communication agent, etc. are invited to talk about the realities of their profession. These exchanges are very beneficial and make it possible for a number of students to make a more enlightened choice, while demystifying certain prejudices.

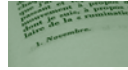
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Supported by these activities in context, classroom presentations on professions continue during the second session, in History or Economics courses, as do the visits by the specialists.

INTEGRATING THE GOALS OF A SCHOOL FOCUSED ON ORIENTATION TO THOSE OF A COURSE WITHIN ITS PROGRAM

In the third session, Humanities students pursue their personal advancement and explore their future reality with assignments they will have to carry out as part of their practical initiation to Humanities methodology. This goes beyond coming into contact with professors and involves an actual integration to university studies.

The course makes it possible for students to master research techniques and aims,



and at the same time, to demonstrate an integration of the learning contained in the program. Added to this is a real contact with university life, which will soon be their reality.

A portion of the Practical Initiation course will take place at the UQAC, enabling cégep students to complete certain assignments of a methodological nature. The course has two objectives: To enable cégep students to be in contact with university courses and life; and to apply data collection techniques proper to the Humanities.

These students attend a university class in the field of studies that interests them.

A HANDS-ON EXPERIENCE IN COLLABORATION WITH THE UNIVERSITY

Thanks to this integration activity, a group of Humanities students at the Cégep are getting an up close and personal experience of what it is like to be a university student for at least three days at the UQAC. These students attend a university class in the field of studies that interests them.

To ensure a better integration into university faculties, they are sponsored and coached by students enrolled in the same university program. In addition, they must meet with a professor (or lecturer) for the purpose of obtaining more information on the selected study program (investigative procedure taught in methodology course) and the functioning of the university environment. This interview can be carried out with a professional from a research centre. In doing this, students learn to master the investigative technique while validating their choice of university program.

Parallel to these activities, students can visit research centres linked to their field of studies or laboratories offering disciplinary applications (for instance, a mapping centre in geography or an observation laboratory in psychology). Students can also participate in other characteristic activities if these are available when the activity is carried out (disciplinary activities such as mini work placements).

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This integration activity usually takes place during the October break in academic courses at Cégep de Baie-Comeau, which does not affect the progress of the session. Staff members, including at least one professor from the program, accompany the students to assure educational supervision. In addition, most students are enrolled in the activity "A choice for the future" that provides a one day "immersion" in the reality of the work field they have selected.

According to Mrs. Gina Gagnon, coordinator for School orientation and information at UQAC, this integration activity to university studies offered to Humanities students at Cégep de Baie-Comeau makes it possible for both the university and the students to bridge the gap between the information received before entering university and the reality of university studies. This project has enabled us to confirm that the operations linked to student undertakings are part of a continuum (information search, admission request, enrolment, welcome and integration, supervision, etc.), and that the mechanisms put in place by the UQAC effectively meet student needs.

A PROJECT SHOWING RESULTS

For the past three years, there have been very concrete results. For instance, students at Cégep de Baie-Comeau who participated in this activity had already acquired a certain level of adaptation when they arrived at university. The benefits of an easier transition makes it is possible for them to study, get involved and get to work on campus faster.

It is also reasonable to believe that this experience enables them to further confirm their interests, validate their program choice and even make the UQAC their choice of teaching establishment. In addition to shedding a very positive light on the institution through its collaboration, the University is proud to help the students complete their study project.

When we take a step back from the activities offered to the students, it becomes clear that career counselling is being provided by teachers as well as by the various professional services. This concerted effort helps students to learn more about their characteristics on a personal, social, and professional level.



The first year's activities accentuate the exploration of personal characteristics and allow students to get to know themselves better in relation to their program. The activities in the university session as well as those of "A choice for the future" make it possible to confirm in a concrete manner, the ideas they have on making connections between professions, the program, and their personal traits. All these activities are part of a process that favours and supports the students in making a sound decision. In short, the vocational process proposed to students achieves its three major objectives:

- **Know yourself well enough to make a decision**

Students learn how to carry out a search process, where they discover several professional disciplines without necessarily making a final choice. This is a phase of tolerance to ambiguity in basic activities, and the interveners are well aware that the students are engaged in an awareness process and are learning to define themselves in relation to the programs.

- **Explore various professions**

An in-depth exploration of professions makes students realize that they must reflect on their choices for the future. In this respect, we speak of crystallization, since identifying a university program enables them to perceive themselves in relation to this choice. So they embark on a personal quest for self-knowledge while facing the unknown: The practical exploration of a university program. In this sense, the UQAC placement enables them to realize whether or not they have the required profile to function easily in the profession in question, i.e. is it possible for them, through this placement, to project into the future and picture themselves in this profession? In addition, the fact of attending these university-level courses enables them to realize that they understand how the latter unfold, which often reassures them on their chances of success at university.

- **Make a choice**

The third objective is a consequence of the first two. Based on an initial premise, the student specifies the personal criteria required to be effective in the selected university field. Once the placement at UQAC is completed, the student verifies if the perception of this university choice still corresponds to his expectations and interests. Is he cut out for this field of studies? Has he considered the whole set of competencies required for this discipline? This places the student in a reflection process while being in possession of all the relevant information.

CONCLUSION

The experiment undertaken at Cégep de Baie-Comeau makes it possible for students to work on their university choice from the outset of their Humanities study program. The fact of partially eliminating their uncertainty and enabling them to explore the labour market from the start, engages them immediately in a reflection process.

However, identifying their own values and fields of interest and obtaining practical knowledge of the labour market are, in our opinion, the keys to unlocking this reflection, which will lead them to an enlightened career choice.

Concurrently through this process, students who have completed the UQAC placement make an informed choice as to their university studies. There also seems to be a reduction in the number of program changes after one university study session, since the students already know the content of the study program and have a good idea as to the openings on the job market.

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Applying the principles of a school using an orientation approach made it possible for various services provided at the Cégep de Baie-Comeau to work in unison toward a common goal centered on the personal development of students. Thus, the Cégep's professional staff, teaching body and administrative personnel are all aware that their role is not limited to working towards student success, but also to providing students with tools to ensure an informed choice for university studies. The experience at Cégep de Baie-Comeau has generated significant interest among new students, to the extent that they are registering for a placement at the UQAC at the beginning of the very first session even though the placement only occurs in the third session. ◀



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Roland MORIN has been a guidance counsellor at Cégep de Baie-Comeau for the past fifteen years and initiated the implementation of the orientation approach at the Cégep. He is also very actively involved in the academic success of the establishment's Innu clientele.

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Gina GAGNON has been a dynamic coordinator in career orientation and school information at the Université du Québec à Chicoutimi for a number of years. She is responsible for encouraging the UQAC to open up to projects relating to career orientation. She is strongly engaged in all projects relating to student success.

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