

# WORKING THE HALLS: AN APPROACH THAT IS GAINING GROUND



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During the past few years, in the wake of Fonds Jeunesse activities, certain cégeps saw the birth of a new approach for getting close to students called 'working the halls'. The approach, which evolved from street work, has a simple objective: To improve student well being. Taking liberties with official methods, the approach is designed to support students by getting close to their hearts, their setbacks and accomplishments, enabling the intervenors to focus on the reality of what students are living today. For those who know little or nothing about the approach, this article provides a brief overview of what is being done at Cégep de Sainte-Foy. It can provide a better understanding of this type of intervention that involves working among students, outside the classroom.

## BRIEFLY

Initially, our main motivation was the rate of suicide among young adults. Our own college had experienced the death of a student in the early 90's. She had committed suicide by setting herself on fire. This event was highly disturbing for all of us. As a result, the *Service des activités socioculturelles et communautaires* was mandated to develop a suicide prevention program. Between now and the end of this decade when our mandate ends, progress will have been achieved by trial and error. Peer-assist groups have been created, collaboration developed with other

Cégeps in the area, and, together with the Centre de prévention du suicide, on-site meetings set up for those who work with students, etc.

During the course of these activities, we realized that there was a need to get closer to students. Despite traditional services such as psychology, support services, and/or religious services, we felt we had to think outside the box and go directly to where students hang out and can be found: The hallways. Therefore, we put together a three-person team, each member possessing relevant experience working in the field: Edith Coulombe is from the municipal sector and was involved in the launch of a network of street workers; Bruno Marchand has extensive experience in the community, and I have done pastoral work on the streets for the Québec diocese. We share a common goal: The importance of being close to our youth and what they are living. A Fonds Jeunesse grant arrived just in time to let us put our ideas to the test in the field.

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## THE PHILOSOPHY OF INTERVENTION

Working the halls is a front line activity that takes place in the immediate environment, where events happen naturally. It is characterized by values, attitudes, intervention methods and a code of ethics. The hallway workers who initiate these encounters are part of the dynamics of human encounters and interact spontaneously with students. They seek to get close to the students without being pushy. It is an approach that builds on trust between intervenors and students developed through these hallway encounters; it is a helping relationship but most importantly, it is a living relationship. The intervenor becomes the primary intervention tool, with his unique strengths and weaknesses. His goal is to get closer to students without becoming boring, and to remain aware of the "sacred character" of these encounters. As we frequently confront the habits and values of a younger generation, we must differentiate between "adhering to the values of another" and "being in connection with the culture of another". As such, we should use various codes without negating our own identity. This means accepting differences yet displaying our own colours. Working the halls requires maturity, patience, receptivity, a good dose of humility and the ability to give of oneself.

The hallway worker offers the student professional assistance or, at least, some form of support or coaching. It is crucial to be part of a support network so he is not isolated in his supporting role with the student. At our cégep, we work closely with internal resources (psychologists, professors, professionals) and external resources



(Centre de prévention du suicide, Centre de crise de Québec, health networks and community organizations. Good knowledge of the network means the ability to customize references, if necessary, and thereby humanize the relationship to services and institutions for young people who may be on the verge of dropping out.

### HALLWAYS

Contrary to youth who live on the streets, college students are willing to accept structure and to live within an educational framework. In this respect, they are already connected to a good support system. However, because they are with us for only 2 or 3 years, we must be proactive if we want to create bonds. To help promote this contact and establish a relationship, we use various active and passive “pretexts”. A petition we prepared on the abolition of suicide is one example of an active pretext. Using the petition, we were able to introduce ourselves and promote the suicide prevention theme. Our objective was not to collect signatures but to allow students to gain greater insight into this issue. An example of passive pretext is to provide students with opportunities to speak to us and ask questions. Using Charlie Brown’s idea from the Schulz comic strip, we opened our own 5¢ psychology stand right near the cafeteria entrance. In this playful setting, we made ourselves available one hour per week. Our goal was to create bonds with students that would later be strengthened through hallway encounters.

### LIMITATIONS

We cannot gloss over the fact that even though we gained recognition within our establishment, the beginnings of this type of approach are often disturbing. Working in teams and maintaining a minimum of political representation within the milieu is therefore important. Working in multi-disciplinary teams is even more important since the limits of confidentiality are quickly reached and we must avoid the rifts that some students tend to create between intervenors. It is also important to signal “crisis” interventions as they tend to require great energy and usually result in direct interventions with a single student versus the building of bonds with all the others. This is often true, among others, with students suffering from mental health problems.

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Another key factor for the success of the project is coordination. Coordination softens the irritants and ensures that intervenors are not exhausted by working constantly in flexible frameworks and grey areas.

### OUR HOPES

Statistics show that we have had a positive impact on the suicide rate at our college. We do not believe that we are the only factor that caused this decrease but the fact remains that the suicide rate has dropped from two per year to 1 in four years.

This alone validates our approach. We have also certainly contributed to changing the image of the cégep as a cold anonymous place. After four years of meeting with professors and professionals through various interventions, we can attest to the synergy of the intervenors as concerns the well being of our youth. This synergy among key players is perhaps the greatest benefit of this adventure.

The formation of a human chain allows us to reconnect with common values of mutual assistance and solidarity. It creates alliances that we could not have predicted.

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Although our approach cannot be exported without first being translated and adapted to the culture and the specifics of the milieu, we hope this overview will encourage you to give this adventure a try. ◀▶

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