RECOGNITION OF ACQUIRED COMPETENCIES

ACCESS TO FORMAL RECOGNITION

HÉLÈNE DE CHAMBERET
Pedagogical advisor
CEGEP de Sainte-Foy

CHRISTIAN MORIN
Pedagogical advisor
CEGEP de Sainte-Foy

Sophie has been working as an office associate in a hospital for a number of years. She was hired on the basis of skills developed during high school, which, at the time, were adequate for her to perform the tasks assigned to her. Things have changed in the interim. Sophie has had the opportunity to participate in one-off training sessions. Over the years, she has been able to mobilize personal resources for her own development. However she does not have a college diploma, and this prevents her from being promoted or applying for new jobs. CEGEPs have something that will enable Sophie to improve her current situation: recognition of acquired competencies (RAC).

The RAC program allows individuals with workplace-acquired competencies to receive a diploma without engaging in a training process that would be difficult to reconcile with family and professional commitments. This article outlines the RAC[1] process and explains how it was developed and implemented in colleges. The underlying premise is that one should not have to get training for what they already know. The approach centers on individuals in all their aspects. RAC places value on self-learning and life experiences while allowing individuals to have their skills officially recognized. Consequently, the process responds to the issues involved in social equity. It relies on accessibility and perseverance, adapting to each individual's needs, instead of the other way around. This flexibility in no way sets aside the rigor without which colleges could not guarantee the value of the diplomas they issue. As of today, thousands of people in Quebec—including many immigrants—have had official recognition granted through the RAC. Indeed, the RAC provides immigrants with a valuable opportunity to get a Quebec diploma, which facilitates their entry into the job market.

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For a number of years, most colleges have offered the RAC for some of their programs. This offer, generally under the responsibility of continuing-education departments or services, continues to grow. Indeed, more than a hundred career programs—awarding the same Diploma of Collegial Studies (DEC) and Attestation of College Studies (AEC) as earned through classroom study—are already available in the RAC process. Other programs are currently being implemented in other colleges.

Candidates who want to go through the RAC process apply for admission to a CEGEP[2], in the same way as for any other program. In this context, one must build its own application file. In addition to the usual administrative documents required for admission, which will be reviewed, the candidate's application must include a self-assessment. Candidates are provided with self-assessment forms that help them highlight the essential elements of their competencies for assessment, determine if they master these competencies, and prepare for a validation interview.

During this interview, the candidate is questioned by experts in the field to determine if the competencies previously acquired match those in the particular program and gauge if the candidate's level of mastery is consistent with standards. The next step consists in questioning the candidate to determine if the attained competencies correspond with those of the program. If the conditions are met, the content specialists will give their approval for the candidate's admission to the RAC process. Then the candidate is assessed with respect to each of the program's competencies. The assessment methods, sometimes referred to as "recognition conditions," can be in-school exams, personal presentations, observation in the workplace, portfolios, discussions, video recordings of task performance, and so on. The content specialist who conducts the assessment will record the results on a separate sheet for each competency. The sheet allows the specialist to judge the candidate fairly with respect to clearly defined criteria and to inform the candidate of any discrepancies between acquired skills and knowledge and the targeted level of performance. Candidates who reach the threshold for all the competencies elements are awarded the corresponding diploma. Those who have partly met the requirements are offered upgrading through a training plan designed to fill in the gaps. A variety of scenarios may be presented to candidates to complete the development of their competencies. Most often, they involve attending workshops in an educational institution, keeping a workplace learning logbook, or receiving telephone coaching from a specialist who has recommended reading material and practical exercises.

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[1] For more information about RAC, visit the Web site at [www.reconnaissancedesacquis.ca].

[2] Usually through a regional admissions department.
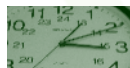
It should also be pointed out that each candidate is individually assigned a content specialist, or pedagogical advisor, who provides support throughout the process. Without this support and close contact, the process could be discouraging for candidates who haven't had to deal with academic requirements for a number of years.

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Implementing RAC has required colleges to undertake significant developments in terms of framework and administration. A challenge lies in reconciling flexibility and rigor. Flexibility makes it possible to take into account the diversity of experiences and organizational constraints on a per-candidate basis, while rigor is required to safeguard the credibility of the diplomas awarded and ensure fairness.

Therefore, frameworks for each program need to be developed at the local and ministerial levels. In the latter case, the frameworks are available throughout the system and funded by the Ministère de l'Enseignement supérieur, de la Recherche, de la Science et de la Technologie (MESRST). The RAC framework is different in that it does not pertain to the logical development of competencies, as in the case of a regular school setting, but rather to mobilizing knowledge in order to demonstrate prior learning. As a result, only the competencies are considered and framed so as to promote the integration and inclusion of competencies. The core of a competency generally corresponds to the work's representative essential elements. In compliance with the general and technical frameworks published by the ministry (MELS, 2005), the assessments are tailored to the experiential nature of the learning. As with the usual school stream, the equivalence of assessments between colleges remains an issue.

At the same time, all CEGEPs must efficiently manage the records of all candidates. In fact, unlike the students taking courses in the regular stream, RAC candidates can start the process at any time and work at a pace consistent with the demands of their personal and professional lives. Many CEGEPs also offer the possibility of completing the entire process from a distance.

The many challenges facing colleges and the major social issue of training and qualification related to RAC led the ministry to designate four CEGEPs as CERACs (centers of expertise for the recognition of acquired competencies). Namely, Champlain Regional College, CEGEP Marie-Victorin, and the Drummondville and Sainte-Foy CEGEPs have been mandated to support the other colleges with respect to consolidating the RAC. While fostering the development of joint action, the mission of these four institutions is to:

- increase the offer of service related to the recognition of acquired competencies throughout the province of Quebec;
- improve the quality of services offered related to the recognition of acquired competencies;
- contribute to the development of the recognition of acquired competencies. [Free translation]

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Given such conditions, there is no doubt that RAC services will continue to grow and be deployed across the entire province. RAC is an excellent means for formally awarding official recognition. Adult graduation responds to major social issues; not only fostering professional integration, thereby fighting against poverty and exclusion, but acting on the identity of individuals, their self-esteem, their civic engagement, their parenting roles, and so on. And all this will have positive impacts on future generations. It is quite understandable, therefore, why, since 2002, the government has made RAC a theme for priority intervention in the province,[3] and why it has mandated the CERACs with harmonizing and developing the offer of services pertaining to the recognition of acquired competencies. ◖

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[3] See *Politique gouvernementale d'éducation des adultes et de la formation continue* published by the Ministère de l'Éducation in 2002 [www.mess.gouv.qc.ca/publications/pdf/SR_politique_gouv_education_adultes.pdf].
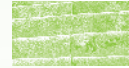
Hélène DE CHAMBERET is a pedagogical advisor at CEGEP de Sainte-Foy. She holds undergraduate and master's degrees in social communication and an undergraduate degree in education. In addition, she has about a dozen years of teaching experience, including five years with a particular focus on RAC. She is especially interested in the social issue of adult graduation.

hdechamberet@cegep-ste-foy.qc.ca

Christian MORIN has taught French at CEGEP de Sainte-Foy for 14 years. In 2001, he became a pedagogical advisor at that institution. While focusing mainly on the issue of academic success, he has also been involved in program development and assessment. For the *Commission d'évaluation de l'enseignement collégial* (Commission for assessing college teaching), he has served on site-visit committees to assess programs. He also sat on the advisory committee to assess the application of institution policies for evaluating learning. He has been a member of the *Pédagogie collégiale* editorial committee since 2004.

christian.morin@cegep-ste-foy.qc.ca