

COLLEGE STUDENTS AND MIGRATION FOR STUDIES:

A PHENOMENON TO DISCOVER FOR BETTER INTERVENTIONS!*

At Fermont, all Secondary V students are in the same boat: they must say good-bye to their parents and leave home to pursue their studies. This represents an enormous challenge for many, especially for those who have always lived in this mining town.

Bélanger (2004, p. 24)

A number of authors, including Elizov (1990), Barbeau (1994), Ducharme and Terril (1994), Larose and Roy (1994) as well as Paradis (2000) to name just these, have already studied the question of the transition from secondary school to college. We glean from their writings that this passage represents a period of major change in the life of a young adult. But what do we know about students who, in addition to the transition from secondary school to college, must also adapt to a new environment and to a different rhythm of life?

Each year, thousands of young Quebeckers leave their home regions to settle in a city close to the college they have chosen for the pursuit of their post-secondary education. The *Groupe de recherche sur la migration des jeunes (GRMJ)* has been particularly interested in the movement of young people across Quebec. Studies show that nearly one-quarter of young inter-regional migrants in Quebec migrate to pursue their college studies (Deschenaux and Molgat, 2003, p. 755; Gauthier and collab., 2006, p. 16). However, few researchers¹ have been interested in the situation of thousands of students who are compelled to migrate, by choice or by obligation, in order to obtain a college diploma in the field of their choice.

What needs and difficulties do these young migrants have? Do colleges plan welcoming and integration practices to facilitate their adjustment to the new environment? Can the fact of migrating have an influence on success and perseverance in school?



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During 2008-2009, we conducted research² on the phenomenon of college student migration to establishments that are members of the *Association des collèges privés du Québec (ACPQ)*. Our main objectives consisted of defining the concept 'migrant for studies', of evaluating the scope of the phenomenon and of describing student migration as well as welcoming and integration practices for migrants from the perspective of interveners working in these establishments. In this article, we will focus primarily on the research objective that consisted of making recommendations for establishments in the network of private colleges, which can also apply to public CEGEPs, of practices to implement for welcoming student migrants.

OVERVIEW OF THE METHODOLOGY

By providing us with the list of their newly-registered students, 11 private colleges participated in our research. This collaboration allowed us to evaluate the scope of the phenomenon of migration for studies. Also, during semi-structured interviews³ we met with 22 interveners (guidance counsellors, social workers, socio-cultural animators, etc.) distributed over nine colleges. These interviews enabled us to better understand the phenomenon from the perspective of those who are in contact with migrant students and to make an inventory of special measures that are made available to them.

* Please note that this article as well as the quotations contained herein have been translated by a professional working for the magazine and not by the authors themselves.

¹ In fact, Bourque (2008) studied the migration of Quebec college students in urban regions and Roy (2003) briefly discusses the subject in his research on success.

² Our research was funded by the *Ministère de l'Éducation du Loisir et du Sport (MELS)* in the context of the *Programme de recherche et d'expérimentation du réseau privé de l'enseignement collégial (PREP)*.

³ Given the exploratory nature of our research and due to time constraints, we decided to meet with the interveners rather than with the students themselves.



WHAT IS A 'MIGRANT FOR STUDIES'?

What defines migrants first of all is the displacement of their lives from one location to another. When we use the term “migrant students”, we are referring to students who leave their places of origin “at a distance which is far enough away that there is no confusion between migrating and moving” (Gauthier, 2003, p. 20). In fact, compared to students who move but still remain in the same town or region, the moves of migrant students undoubtedly involve separation from family and from their social networks thereby requiring an adaptation to a new environment and a break with routine, with daily life.

Beyond a theoretical definition, we needed an operational procedure in order to quantify the phenomenon of migration for studies. After consulting the work of Frenette (2002) as well as data from Statistics Canada (Beshiri, 2005), we based our definition on a criterion of distance. Thus, we consider a migrant student to be one who must travel more than 80 km to get to the CEGEP, something that involves setting up and adapting to a new milieu which is outside the student’s usual environment. Furthermore, we used the concept of “potential mover” to designate students who live at “a distance which would eventually be too far (from their colleges) for them to commute” daily (Frenette, 2002, p. 6), say between 40 km and 80 km. The relative proximity in geographic terms between

their places of origin and their study locations for these “potential movers” does not require the same separation from their social networks as that experienced by migrant students. According to the participants in our interviews, we should also distinguish between the situation of short-distance migrants (home for the weekend) and long-distance migrants (occasional trips home) in order to better identify the problems surrounding this phenomenon. Our work also enabled us to establish that the definitions for “migrant students” or for “potential movers” can vary from one establishment to another and that the criteria that we present here are to be considered to be guidelines. For example, the geographic location of a college can influence the profile of migrant students and potential movers.

A PHENOMENON THAT IS CONSIDERABLY WIDESPREAD

Based on these indicators, we were able to quantify the phenomenon in the 11 participating establishments, as shown in the table below. Overall, the data collected demonstrate that 16% of the 4,663 newly-registered students in the fall of 2008 were migrant students. Among the students, 12% are in the category of potential movers and a little less than three-quarters (72%) are considered to be non-migrant students. Thus, we determined that more than one in four students faces issues relating to transport or to migration, and that represents a phenomenon that is not negligible.

FIRST SESSION STUDENTS REGISTERED IN PARTICIPATING COLLEGES IN THE FALL OF 2008
BASED ON STATUS, SEX AND FIELD OF STUDIES

	<i>n</i>		<i>n</i>		<i>n</i>		<i>n</i>		Total for 11 Colleges	
Status										
Migrants	740								16%	
Potential movers	541								12%	
Non-migrants	3382								72%	
	MIGRANTS		POTENTIAL MOVERS		NON-MIGRANTS		TOTAL			
	<i>n</i>	rate	<i>n</i>	rate	<i>n</i>	rate	<i>n</i>	rate	<i>n</i>	rate
Sex										
Girls	430	58%	361	67%	2055	61%	2846	61%		
Boys	310	42%	180	33%	1327	39%	1817	39%		
Fields of study										
Welcome/Integration	14	2%	16	3%	111	3%	141	3%		
AEC	53	7%	51	9%	689	20%	793	17%		
Technical	540	73%	302	56%	1711	51%	2553	55%		
Pre-university	133	18%	172	33%	871	26%	1176	25%		



Further, the data obtained indicate that girls do not seem to migrate more than boys because their levels are almost identical. We did however notice that migrant students are clearly over-represented in the technical programs of participating colleges: even if they constitute only 55% of the members of our sample, students registered in technical programs constitute 73% of the group of migrant students.

NEEDS AND CHARACTERISTICS OF MIGRANT STUDENTS

During the semi-structured interviews, the college interveners helped us to identify certain characteristics of migrant students, their needs and the difficulties they encounter. Thus, according to the interveners, the motives for leaving home are not the same for everyone: while some students have no choice but to migrate, generally because the program they want to study is not offered in their region, or else because there is simply no CEGEP or college close to home, others choose to do so voluntarily for all kinds of reasons (to follow a friend, to have a new experience, the reputation of an establishment or a program offered, etc.). Among those who choose to migrate, some do it because they feel a need for freedom or the need to gain autonomy. This can be due to a variety of factors: family environment, a need for self-affirmation, a search for freedom, wanting to change social networks, a taste for adventure, seeking new challenges or to prove to themselves that they can do it. Furthermore, according to the interveners, regardless of whether or not their choices are voluntary, migrant students are called upon to live outside of their normal comfort zones, away from their reference points and they are more likely to be unhappy. Finally, migration for studies implies a double adaptation, as Roy (2003) describes it: the interveners recognize that the transition between secondary school and college constitutes a major experience for a young person and having to migrate in order to pursue one's studies represents an additional challenge. The student must integrate into a new milieu and must also overcome the stress associated with this change, as exemplified by the following comment by one of the interveners:

“Migrant students who arrive at college have a lot to manage — considerably more than other students who are pampered at home. They must prepare their own meals, they must do the grocery shopping, they must do their housework and they have to manage situations with their roommates. These are a lot of new things for them to manage.”

The interveners also mentioned four major needs of all migrant students: organizational needs (time management, daily tasks and school work) that we just covered; the need

to be informed, secure and supported; financial needs and also the need to make a new social network for themselves and to become integrated.

Even though several measures have been taken to ease the transition from secondary school to college, colleges offer very few services designed especially for students who must adapt to a new milieu. Interventions with these students are carried out without preparation, without knowledge of the phenomenon [...].

HOW WELCOMING ARE COLLEGES FOR MIGRANT STUDENTS?

The inquiry carried out with the interveners led us to conclude that specific welcoming or integration practices for migrant students do not really exist. Even though several measures have been taken to ease the transition from secondary school to college, colleges offer very few services designed especially for students who must adapt to a new milieu. Interventions with these students are done without preparation, without knowledge of the phenomenon and there are no preventive measures, as mentioned by this respondent:

“It is not about preparation. It is more about reparation. I do not think any prevention is being done. When I say ‘reparation’ I mean that students come to see me because, all of a sudden, they wonder if moving was the right thing to have done. Things are not going well, they are going downhill, etc. Only then do we analyze the situation and we realize that we are dealing with a migrant student.[...] So, I work on the problem when they turn up in my office.”

Since they do not have information concerning migrant students and since no clear policy for dealing with them exists, it is difficult for interveners to be proactive, to foresee problems they will encounter, to do anything but improvise solutions to problems before them when the damage has been done.

Nevertheless, many interveners have underlined the fact that they pay special attention to students who come from far away and that they try and meet their needs as best they can.

Furthermore, even though colleges do not plan any specific welcoming activities for migrant students, residences (for those colleges which have them) do offer services to help with the preparation and integration of young people who have



come from regions that are farther away: interveners on site, meetings with the students, social activities, etc. Right away, according to the interveners, a difference is noticeable between migrant students who opt to live in residence and others who choose to live in an apartment: the former have additional services available to them and they live in an environment that fosters the development of a new social network.

Overall, the majority of interveners consider that adapting to a new living environment becomes an additional test for a new student; indeed, as we mentioned above, it is a double adjustment. If not everyone sees the urgency of implementing welcoming and integration practices designed specifically for migrant students, many are in agreement that it is important to take their situation into account and to respond to their needs as quickly as possible.

► A FEW RECOMMENDATIONS TO EASE THE INTEGRATION OF MIGRANT STUDENTS

The data collected allow us to state that interveners are aware of the problems and challenges which await migrant students. Along these lines, while speaking of migrant students, one intervener argues that, “any time a person has to adapt, there is stress”. Meanwhile, the lack of knowledge about the reality facing migrant students prevents interveners from developing adequate intervention strategies. Thus, based on the results of our research, we propose three general recommendations along with some concrete examples of practices to implement that, we hope, will allow college staff members to facilitate the welcome and integration of migrant students and to act in an organized, rather than ‘improvised’, manner. Furthermore, given that the context concerning migration for studies and the characteristics of migrant students can vary from one college to another, it is important to treat these recommendations as guidelines and to adapt them to the reality of each college (geographic location, private or public, number of students, the regions of origin of migrant students, etc.).

Act early: prepare for the arrival of migrant students

It is important to intervene as quickly as possible to facilitate the adaptation and to prevent unhappiness as well as loneliness from setting in, as well as to avoid some migrant students, as we have been told, from being “tempted to return home”. Intervenors agree that the very act of migrating amounts to a major stress for young students and that the first session is considered to be the period when they are most at risk.

In this respect, the welcome given to migrant students is a determining factor for many of them. Still we have to know whom we are trying to help.

Identifying who the migrant students are is the first step to take in order to welcome them properly and to facilitate their integration. In order to accomplish this, colleges must implement a specific procedure. The criteria relating to the distance travelled discussed earlier may be useful, but each establishment must define a profile for these migrant students taking into account their geographic situations (the distance they have to travel, the time required, the usual traffic, etc). It is also important to note that, in the case of colleges that offer residence service, it is important not to be limited by identifying as migrant students only those who choose to live in residence. As another intervener put it, “When these students live in apartments, we do not necessarily recognize them” as migrant students.

Contact and prepare migrant students before their entry to college. Acting early means both to have a proactive approach and to intervene even before the migrant student sets foot in college. In an ideal world, colleges would be involved in preparing students as they get ready to leave home. According to some interveners, this measure can be all the more important when students come from rural areas and are therefore not accustomed to large urban centres. For example, one intervener suggests that “colleges can prepare them, can give them more information on cities, large educational centres like Montreal, Quebec City or elsewhere”. This preparation should be carried out before their entry to college, for example with the assistance of partners from the secondary schools from which many of the college migrant students originate.

In spite of the difficulties linked to adaptation, the act of migrating can be very beneficial for a young adult.

Facilitate the welcome and the integration of migrant students

According to the interveners we met, it is useful to identify and to get to know the migrant students in order to facilitate and encourage their access to the appropriate services, given that some students, in the words of one intervener, “do not dare to use the services put in place for them. They feel ill-at-ease about using these services”. Still, we must have services for migrant students.



The fact of putting in place special tools and services for migrant students might make it possible to mitigate some of the adjustment problems they experience and, by doing so, according to some interveners, this might increase their chances of success. Here are some examples of such tools and services.

- Create a Web page specifically for migrant students on the Internet site of the college. This page could include information on activities and services offered at the college, help and support services that are available, advice on how to prepare before migrating, comments from migrant students from previous years, information (services and activities) on the destination city, etc. This Web page could also be useful for parents⁴ of migrant students in order to inform and reassure them but equally to answer questions that they often ask.
- Set up an e-mail distribution list to disseminate information to migrant students: specific activities, special invitations, reminders for up-coming events, etc.
- Offer workshops or lectures on specific issues (making a budget, nutrition, lifestyle, time management) that could be designed for all students, but with special attention to migrant students in order to encourage their participation.
- Organize integration activities. Colleges already offer a number of activities, but they must make sure that migrant students participate in them. Each establishment must take steps to prevent new students, especially migrant students, from feeling isolated. According to the interveners, integration activities organized by program are more inclusive, more personalized and foster a feeling of belonging to the college or the program. In short, the idea is to create opportunities and places for students to meet.

Create partnerships with the city, with public transport services or with any other relevant organization. On this subject, during our study we found that the city of Sherbrooke stands out for its initiatives which target, among others, migrant students. In addition to offering all students free access to public transportation, the city implemented a group of activities and services available to all new post-secondary students arriving in Sherbrooke. This kind of organization not only signals to migrant students that they are welcome, but it probably also contributes to their integration into their new living environment. Colleges can also associate themselves with projects like *Bienvenue à Montréal* put in place

by *Forum jeunesse de l'Île de Montréal* and their partners to meet the needs of young students from outlying regions who have chosen to establish themselves in the Quebec metropolis⁵.

Avoid stigmatizing migrant students or infantilizing them

“The fact of migrating can lead to problems; but the migration itself is not a problem,” one respondent pointed out. Colleges must be cautious in all their endeavours. Although it is important to identify migrant students, they must not feel that they are different from the others or that they are experiencing a problematic situation. In spite of the difficulties linked to adaptation, the act of migrating can be very beneficial for a young adult:

“I believe that it contributes [to the development of their] capacities to adapt. I believe that putting too much [emphasis on their situation] and causing a social divide between students could lead to stigmatization.”

We must not forget that at this age, young people want and feel the need to gain autonomy, to have more freedom and, in short, to fly with their own wings! Therefore, although more personalized services would be very useful, migrant students must not feel that their situation is problematic or indeed that they are different from other students.

CONCLUSION

Our research enabled us to observe that the phenomenon of migration for studies is almost absent from the scientific literature and is probably as misunderstood in the private college environment as it is in the public college environment. We also noticed that the mobility of young students in higher learning institutions in Quebec is in full expansion (Deschenaux and Molgat, 2003, p. 755).

⁴ The literature we consulted and the data we collected suggest that parents are often involved in the decision-making process regarding their child's migration for studies, in the steps that need to be taken as well as in the financing of their studies. It would be important to prepare a kit for parents that could include information on the college and the services offered, basic information on the city or the region, a *Frequently Asked Questions* section to answer to the most common questions and information on the reality of young migrant students, the difficulties they frequently encounter and their principal needs.

⁵ *Bienvenue à Montréal: La référence pour les jeunes en provenance des régions.* [<http://www.bienvenueamontreal.info>]



However, as one intervener pointed out, it is rare that we take the time to dwell on their situation:

“I realize that it is interesting to think about this. We know that we have students coming from elsewhere, but it is rare that we take the time to stop and reflect on this matter.”

In light of the data collected from the interveners in the college milieu who answered our questions based on their impressions or their intuition, relying nevertheless on their experience in the milieu, we believe that it would be important to better understand the situation of migrant students from their own points of view. So we need to search out the views of the students who are directly affected by the phenomenon. What are the difficulties that they themselves think they encounter? What are, according to them, their principal needs and the best ways to address them? Furthermore, more research is needed to determine if the act of migrating has an impact on success or on academic perseverance. To this end, it would also be necessary to expand this research to the entire college network in order to obtain a more comprehensive view of the phenomenon. In this way, whether they leave Fermont, or any other town in Quebec, to study far away from home, young migrant students will be better understood and supported by the interveners in their colleges. ◀▶

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