Demystifying RAC

Recognition of Acquired Competencies (RAC) offers individuals who have acquired skills, knowledge and behaviours pertinent to a given field, without having completed an Attestation of College Studies (ACS) or Diploma of Collegial Studies (DCS) in that field, the opportunity to obtain formal recognition of those competencies. At Vanier, we have three programs available through RAC: Early Childhood Education (ACS), Skills for the Administrative Assistant (ACS), and Special Care Counselling (DCS).

The following three scenarios exemplify the typical profiles of individuals who undertake RAC at Vanier College:

Scenario 1: Before undertaking RAC, one recent graduate worked in a daycare for 36 years. In time, he came to realize that administration was treating him differently because he was limited in his tasks due to being technically "unqualified." This led him to begin the RAC process.

Scenario 2: Another recent RAC graduate had studied in Vanier's Respiratory and Anaesthesia Program. However, after having children, she decided to take a different career path, finding work in a daycare. She worked in the daycare for 18 years prior to beginning the RAC process.

Scenario 3: A third graduate came from her home country with formal training in teaching elementary school. However, upon coming to Canada, she learned that her studies were not recognized. She found herself working as an unqualified daycare educator, until her employer recommended she consider RAC.

> *"Via the formal recognition of knowledge and skills, RAC fosters equality at work and pride in oneself. RAC is, at heart, a social justice process."*

Upon completion of their respective RAC programs, all three graduates described a feeling of pride, increased respect from colleagues, a salary increase, and increased stability in their positions. There are many other similar stories, which share in the theme that life often takes unexpected turns, that career paths change, and that things do not always work out the way we might anticipate. RAC is a process that allows a person to acquire college-level certification by using the resources they already possess (i.e. skills, knowledge, understanding, and experience) with the end goal of adapting and improving their current situation. Via the formal recognition of knowledge and skills, RAC fosters equality at work and pride in oneself. RAC is, at heart, a social justice process.

RAC is not new. In fact, the origins of RAC reach back to the late 1970s. RACs are offered at the vocational and college level in educational institutions across Quebec and in educational institutions across Canada, where they are called PLAR. In Quebec, RAC is included in the Ministry of Education's Adult and Continuing Education Policy (2002), in which the importance of valuing adult prior learning and skills and increasing access to the recognition process itself are addressed. The CEGEP network even has an organization, the CERAC, which allows CEGEPs to share resources and best practices. This organization contributes significantly to research and innovation for RAC programs.

The remainder of this article aims to further clarify what RAC is and is not, highlighting some key characteristics. It also describes the ideal RAC candidate as well as the RAC process.

What is RAC? RAC is a ministerial evaluation process that allows a candidate the opportunity to demonstrate the knowledge they have gained in a given field through formal, informal, and non-formal workplace and life experiences. The RAC process presumes that the candidate already possesses most of the knowledge necessary to successfully complete RAC.

Who is RAC for? A person who does RAC is called a candidate, rather than a student. As a group, the RAC candidates bear a closer resemblance to the Continuing Education population than to the day program population. This is evident, not only in age, as the median age of a RAC candidate is 37, but also in family and educational situation. All RAC candidates are already employed in the field and the vast majority are working full time to support their own families. Many also already hold university degrees from their home country or from Quebec or other provinces, and/or multiple certificates and training. As such, our RAC candidates are a mature population who already perform the tasks, fulfill the roles, and express the attitudes that are the end goals of learning a competency.

What does the RAC process involve?

RAC entails a six-step process (see Figure). Each successive step is designed to elicit a deeper expression of a candidate's knowledge, as well as a demonstration of skills and performance. This allows us to admit and later recognize only the most competent candidates. In other words, through the six steps, we drill down to find out what the candidates already know and what they already do, recognizing them for these competencies. A candidate works with a content specialist to progress through the recognition of the various competencies of an ACS or DCS program.

RAC is the ideal option for some people.

RAC is based on competencies, which is a set of skills that enable a person to perform a role or function. A person would choose RAC because they are already performing these roles and functions of the job, and would likely not see the relevance of attending courses to learn to do what they already do. They may choose to do RAC to increase their pay, to gain stability in employment, or to access other positions that require qualification.

RAC is not a shortcut.

RAC is not a shortcut. In fact, many people do not finish RAC because they find it too challenging, due to time constraints and the work volume required. However, coming from a place of social justice, we have a duty to provide the opportunity for potential candidates to complete RAC.

It is also important to state that RAC is not a fast track to a DCS or an ACS, nor does it teach the material that is to be evaluated. RAC is not a shortcut for people who are expelled from a program who want to be certified. RAC is also not for high school students, nor for people who were refused entry into a day program.

RAC is not a teaching activity.

RAC is often referred to as an evaluation process, but it is perhaps better understood as a *confirmation process* performed by the content specialist. The content specialist is there to *confirm* whether the candidate has successfully proven that they have the competency mastered. If the candidate does not prove this, various options are considered. In most cases, however, the candidate's competency is proven.

RAC assignments are rigorous.

The assignments in RAC are very rigorous, not just for the candidate, but also for the content specialist. As mentioned earlier, RAC candidates often find it difficult to juggle life, a full-time job, and the RAC evaluation process. All RAC candidates must be working in the field of study in order to qualify for RAC. In terms of the work required by the content specialists, each evaluation form requires copious writing and justification for their decisions. In addition, most of the RAC competencies have interview components, the majority of which are one and a half hours long.

There are safeguards against cheating.

One of the safeguards against cheating is the interview component. This helps the content specialist ensure that the candidate understands the competency well enough to speak about it. Another safeguard is the validation interview, which, along with several previous screening steps, confirms that the candidate is capable of successfully completing a RAC.

Conclusion

RAC addresses the reality of today's employment landscape. One of the most significant career theorists of the 20th century, Donald Super, posited that a career path is never static. For Super, career development is a life-long process, which is informed by environmental, situational, and personal determinants, much as it was for the RAC graduates described earlier. RAC functions to validate the candidate's path and allows him or her to establish his or her career identity. This identity has been built through multiple non-linear, non-conventional, academic, and non-academic experiences. The RAC recognition allows them to move forward, to be recognized, to aspire to better conditions and, especially, to obtain recognition for their hard-won achievements over the years.

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References

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The RAC Process

•Reception
Applicants attend an Information Session and complete and submit a Questionnaire and Letter of Intent.

1

•File Preparation
Applicants complete a Self-Evaluation Form (this takes approximately three hours). At this time, the File Opening dates are given, specifying when applicants will submit all documents and pay the file-opening fees.

2

•File Analysis
Content Specialists and the Pedagogical Counsellor analyse each applicant's documents, in order to determine admissibility to the College and to the RAC evaluation process.

3

•Validation Interview
Content Specialists interview the applicants one-on-one. The successful candidates are selected.

4

•Evaluation of Acquired Competencies
Content Specialists evaluate the candidate's knowledge one-on-one through observation, demonstration, assignments, and interview. If there are elements of the competency that must be acquired following an evaluation, the candidate is offered top-up learning activities.

5

•Certification and Results
When the candidate has succeeded in demonstrating all competencies, the College will award an Attestation of College Studies (ACS/AEC) or a Diploma of College Studies (DCS/DEC).
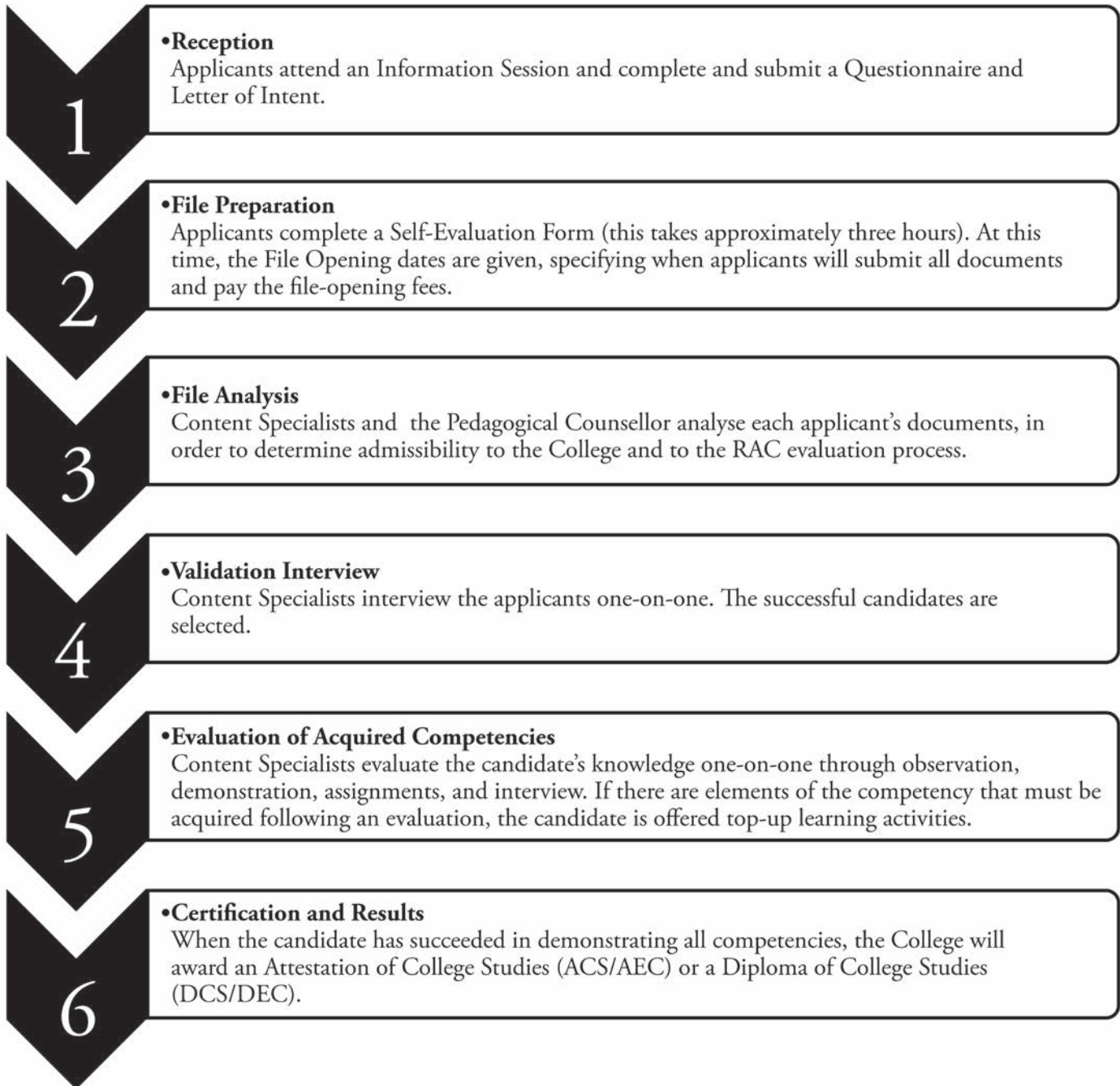
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Figure modified from the *Schéma de la démarche RAC*, developed by CERAC. Used with permission.