



What If the PARES Could Help Prevent Adult College Students From Dropping Out?

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By cross-referencing the reasons why adult college students drop out of higher education with the initiatives of the Plan d'action pour la réussite en enseignement supérieur [Action Plan for Success in Higher Education, Ed.] (PARES), it is possible to identify several courses of action to adequately support this often marginalized group.

The adult student population is one of the fastest-growing student profiles in post-secondary education in recent decades (Caruth, 2014). However, it has received negligible attention from research teams (Robertson, 2020). In a recent issue of *Pédagogie collégiale*, a research article addresses the realities and difficulties experienced by adult students enrolled in college and proposes avenues of reflection to support this population (Lapointe Therrien & Richard, 2021). Like the majority of studies that examine issues related to perseverance, success and the college experience, this research focused on college students. These students represent a segment of the adult student population known as "perseverers." With a few exceptions (Rivière, 1996; Piché & Chouinard, 2013; Richard, 2014), few researchers have interviewed college dropouts. For the most part, those who drop out and their stories are overlooked by research teams. Admittedly, this student population is more difficult to reach for research purposes, but it remains essential to question them in order to improve our understanding of perseverance and success.

This is what we were able to do in a longitudinal study of a sample of 1,073 adult students enrolled in 25 colleges across Quebec.¹ This research study, carried out over five sessions, allowed us to follow the academic careers of adult students, to identify those who abandon their studies, to examine the differences between those who persevere and those who drop out, and then to conduct in-depth interviews with the latter. The aim of this article is to present the reasons why adult dropouts abandon their studies, and to relate them to the action items and measures of the PARES 2021-2026 in order to identify possible solutions. Before doing so, however, it is necessary to define who these adult college students are and to identify the main obstacles they may encounter during their higher education studies.

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Defining the adult student population

While there are a number of characteristics that define the adult post-secondary student (Lapointe Therrien & Richard, 2021)—notably their multiple roles (student, worker, spouse, parent), financial independence, late enrolment in higher education, full-time paid work while studying, diversified educational trajectories—the age criterion is the one primarily referred to in the literature. These sources do not establish a clear consensus for determining the age at which a student is considered an adult, but they do give reason to observe that the age separating adult students from their younger peers is between 21 and 27 (Langrehr *et al.*, 2015). In college, Bessette (2000) sets this division at age 23, while Lapointe Therrien and Richard (2021) set it at 24. At this age, very few adult students are still living at home. They have developed a certain degree of financial autonomy that sets them apart from the majority of college students.

Specific barriers

The perseverance and success of adult students are difficult. Lapointe Therrien and Richard (2021) point out that college graduates aged 24 and over have a lower graduation rate than younger students. This discrepancy is somewhat surprising, given that adult students, particularly those in Quebec's CEGEPs (Richard *et al.*, 2023), have more clearly defined career choices and vocational reflections, a higher level of motivation with regard to their study project than their younger peers, and a greater investment of time in their work and study

time. These are three important factors in college perseverance and success. So how do we explain the lower graduation rate of students aged 24 and over compared to their younger peers? It seems that their academic path is littered with various barriers that are often ignored by administrators.

Indeed, adult post-secondary students can face a variety of barriers to academic success. These barriers were described as early as the 1970s by Cross (1974) in a model that has since been widely used to analyze the realities and difficulties of this student population, a model that contextualizes three sets of barriers: *situational*, *dispositional* and *institutional*. *Situational* barriers are related to the students' life situations. For example, family responsibilities such as dependent children, caring for a sick relative or professional obligations may interfere with study. Financial constraints, lack of time or material resources can also be situational barriers. *Dispositional* barriers refer to the personal characteristics of these adult learners, such as their level of self-confidence, ability to cope with stress and anxiety, self-esteem, competence or self-efficacy with regard to their education. *Institutional* barriers are related to the way educational institutions operate. For example, course schedules that are incompatible with students' work or family responsibilities, lack of support in terms of childcare or other services, or requirements of programs or teaching staff.

Methodological details

This article is based on data from a longitudinal survey (2020 to 2023) of an initial sample eligible for longitudinal

follow-up of 1,015² students aged 24 and over (mean = 32.7 years; standard deviation = 8.2 years) enrolled at 25 colleges in all regions of Quebec. In the Fall 2020 session, all students aged 24 and over newly enrolled in a Diploma of College Studies (DCS) program at participating colleges were invited, through their institution's educational platform, to complete an online questionnaire. Interested students completed the first questionnaire and were invited to do so for the subsequent four sessions, for a total of five questionnaires. These questionnaires made it possible to follow up with the same sample of participants at different times to obtain information about situations, perceptions and events related to their college career, among

² The first questionnaire was completed by 1,073 adult students, 58 of whom did not provide contact details for longitudinal follow-up.

other things. This article focuses on a specific profile of adult students, namely those who declared that they had dropped out of college during the course of the research study ($n = 189$). Of these, 25 were interviewed in a semi-structured setting to gain a better qualitative understanding of the reasons behind the decision to drop out. Quantitative comparisons were made between those who reported dropping out ($n = 189$) and those who persevered and completed all the research surveys ($n = 344$).³ A thematic analysis was used to process the interviews. It aims to organize the data collected into themes according to the research objectives and has enabled

us to identify the ways in which the adult dropouts interviewed approach their academic careers and dropping out. In terms of quantitative analysis, depending on the data to be analyzed, Pearson chi-square statistical tests or analyses of variance (ANOVA) were used to identify the variables on which the two student profiles differ. To improve readability of the text, only probability values (*p-values*) are provided in the following paragraphs.

Reasons for dropping out

Table 1 shows the reasons given by adult students for renouncing their college study project.

³ The sum of these two student subgroups is less than 1,015. This is explained by attrition ($n = 262$), students still studying but at another teaching level ($n = 71$), students having completed their program ($n = 135$) and students having withdrawn from the research study ($n = 14$).

Table 1

Percentage distribution of adult students according to reasons for renouncing their studies

Reason	%
Precarious financial situation	31.0
Difficult work-study-family balance	25.3
Return to employment/reorientation	23.6
Lack of motivation	23.0
Health problems (physical/psychological)	23.0
COVID-19-related situations	21.3
Poor academic performance	10.9
Dissatisfaction with the college environment	9.8
Other personal problems	3.4
Relational issues with other students	1.1

$n=174$ (15 participants did not indicate a reason)



First, it's important to note that this survey was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although this reason was cited by 21.3% of the dropouts, it could not be a significant, general explanation for adult students dropping out, as it was an exceptional situation that occurred during the research.

Financial situation and work-study-family balance

Nearly one-third of adult dropouts report a precarious financial situation. This is not surprising given other recent analyses (Richard, 2023) of adult students, which show significant financial difficulties and worries at a much higher rate than for their younger peers (Richard *et al.*, 2023). In semi-structured interviews, 80% of dropouts explicitly address this aspect: financial worries and hardships are a daily reality. These financial concerns are certainly not a factor contributing to the perseverance and success of this student population.

Balancing work, study and family is emphasized by a quarter of adult dropouts. While only 17.5% of dropouts had to balance all three dimensions, 21.7% had to balance family and studies and 41.3% had to balance work and studies. Thus, only 19.5% of adult dropouts have no children and no paid work. The parental and professional responsibilities of adult students, which differ from those of younger students, raise a number of issues in terms of child-care services, earlier availability of course schedules at the start of the session, and accommodations during the session. Given the challenges of time management for adult students (Lapointe Therrien & Richard, 2021), greater flexibility in their timetables

and course schedules would help them balance their multiple commitments. Moreover, the constraints sometimes imposed on class attendance are irritants for student parents (Larue, Malenfant & Jetté, 2005). Certain rules need to be relaxed or adapted.

Return to employment

Returning to work and changing careers were also mentioned by almost a quarter of adults who had dropped out of school. This reason is often linked to others: financial situation, lack of motivation, poor academic results or dissatisfaction with the college environment. Just over half (52%) of the people we interviewed were planning to return to vocational, college or university studies. They see their dropout as temporary, or as an opportunity to take a different path. However, post-interview follow-ups revealed that between 12 and 24 months after dropping out, only two participants actually returned to school. It seems that vocational choices and reflections are sometimes difficult, and educational paths can be tortuous. Adults' educational paths often take them back and forth between studies at different levels of education and the labour market.

Lack of motivation

Although numerous studies of adult student populations, as well as data from the college environment (Richard *et al.*, 2023), show that adult students appear to be highly motivated by their studies, various circumstances, particularly related to situational or institutional barriers, can quickly affect this motivation negatively. Data collected at the start of the research study also indicated that adults who dropped out of college expressed lower levels of motivation than adults who persevered in their studies ($p = .001$). This reason was cited by nearly a quarter of the adult dropouts.

Mental health

In addition, nearly a quarter of dropouts reported physical or mental health issues. Specific mental health issues were also highlighted by 10 out of 25 (40%) interviewees. These issues, which fall into the category of dispositional barriers, can undoubtedly influence adult students' decisions to drop out. For example, one student told us about the difficulties she was experiencing as an adult college student, and why she decided to drop out to preserve her mental health. In her words, "it's life events that force decisions." In each of the questionnaires, adult students were also asked to rate their level of stress with respect to their studies. Compared to those who persevere, those who drop out report higher levels of stress ($p < .005$). These results suggest that institutional support to promote positive mental health and to thus prevent dropout is a necessary support orientation, especially since a quarter of adult students report that they plan to use psychological support services "offered" at their college (Richard *et al.*, 2023). Those who

took part in our survey said they had difficulty accessing these services.

Finally, less frequently cited reasons such as poor academic performance (10.9%), dissatisfaction with the college environment (quality of teaching or program, inappropriate environment for older students, institutional rules) (9.8%), various personal problems (3.4%) or relationships with other members of the student community (1.1%), round out the reasons given by adult students who renounce their college plans.

All of these reasons for dropping out highlight the particular situations in which adult students find themselves, which can hinder their perseverance and the attainment of a diploma, marginalize them and even put them at a disadvantage (Levin, 2007), in a system that is essentially designed for a younger student body that does not have to juggle various family, professional or community obligations.

Comparisons with the persevering adult population

The data collected allows us to compare persevering students and dropouts on several measured variables. It seems relevant here to list the aspects in which they do or do not differ. In addition to the differences in motivation and stress mentioned in the previous paragraphs, the two groups differ primarily in terms of the program family in which they are enrolled: adult students enrolled in Springboard to a DCS and pre-university programs are proportionally more likely to drop out ($p = .002$). This difference highlights the fact that, while the Springboard pathway can

be a strategy for integrating college studies, for the adult student population, the primary reason for returning to school is the search for future employment motivated by financial goals and clear career aspirations. Perhaps the more abstract nature of the Springboard pathway in terms of developing a career path leads to a higher proportion of adult students who enroll dropping out. Second, adult dropouts expressed lower self-efficacy with regard to their studies than did persevering students ($p < .001$). Analysis of the data from the questionnaires and semi-structured interviews suggests that, for many adult dropouts, poor academic performance, pace of learning, time management, and ability to prepare for evaluations were the main reasons for dropping out. It's not surprising, then, that their sense of competence and confidence in their ability to perform the tasks involved in student work were lower. Finally, the two groups of adult students differ in terms of their adjustment to the college environment. Dropouts feel that colleges are not doing enough to help adults adjust. A higher proportion (8.5%) say that colleges do nothing at all, compared to their persevering peers (3.0%) ($p = .042$). This is particularly evident in the fact that they find it difficult to access the services they need and to meet with teaching staff, who they feel are not available enough. Adult dropouts were also twice as likely (18.0%) as persevering adults (8.9%) to say they were unaware of the services available to them at their college at the end of their first session ($p = .002$).

It's important to note here that the two groups of adult students did not differ in terms of gender, previous college experience, national origin, parental status, paid work while in college, peer relationships or aspects of career reflection.

Avenues for reflection and action items linked to the PARES

We now propose to relate various observations from the specialized literature and data analysis concerning adult dropouts to the action items and measures of the PARES 2021-2026 report in order to identify possible solutions adapted to the adult college population.

First observation

The diversity of adult students' educational backgrounds and related needs

PARES measures⁴:

- 1.1 *Promoting and valuing college and university studies, in particular by providing information [...] on career paths adapted to students' needs.*
- 2.3 *Supporting institutional practices that value the diversity of pathways and progressions.*

These measures echo a wish often expressed by adult students: is it possible to adapt various aspects of college studies to our reality? Among other things, they mention the recognition of previous courses or work experience, which would make their studies easier. The length of programs is also mentioned by the adult student population. Some want accelerated courses, others want to be able to spread their

education over a longer period of time. A number of students express pedagogical desires (more hands-on practice, less group work), while others feel that synchronous or bimodal distance learning formats could be further explored. Finally, many students question certain program rules and requirements, such as mandatory class attendance, the purchase of equipment or the organization of internships. The reality of adult students is not always congruent with the regular college teaching environment, which is designed for a *typical* student population, obviously in the majority. A *marginal* student population, often made up of adults, inevitably deviates from the planned educational sequence and organization. In other words, promoting and valuing different pathways in college studies means offering an inclusive environment that takes into account both academic and personal pace. The personalization of educational pathways would therefore be one of the means not only to adapt the college environment, but above all to reduce the incidence of potential dropout among older students.

Second observation

The financial stakes of the adult student population

PARES measures :

- 1.2 *Promoting and popularizing student financial assistance programs.*
- 1.5 *Studying the geographic and socio-economic factors that influence access to higher education, and proposing orientations to address the issues they raise.*

In light of the data collected from adult dropouts, their financial

situation must be considered as a decisive factor in whether or not they pursue college education. It's not just a matter of promoting and popularizing student financial assistance among adult students, but of tailoring it to their situation. And it's not just a matter of access, but of enabling adults to remain in college under economic conditions that are conducive to their perseverance. It has been suggested elsewhere (Richard *et al.*, 2023) that financial support for returning to school should be improved for students aged 24 and over. This could take the form of increased student financial assistance in the form of loans, increased bursaries, preferential interest rates on student loan repayments, interest vacations on loan repayments or deferred payment of initial student debt. We know that the financial situation of older CEGEP students is precarious, and that this is one of the reasons why they drop out, so appropriate solutions need to be developed and implemented.

⁴ Editor's Note: The PARES measures have been translated from French.

Third observation

The unique needs of adults for school information and career guidance

PARES measure:

1.3 *Promoting the role of guidance and career information resources and increasing access to the services they offer.*

The survey data show that adult dropouts are motivated by more interesting career prospects, and that dropping out is often described as *temporary*. Better personalized career counseling support would be an avenue worth considering, and especially worthwhile for the adult dropout population, since they are twice as likely as the persevering population to be unaware of—and therefore not using—the services offered by the college they attend. If dropping out is seen as a stop at an intersection, adult dropouts are at a red light, facing multiple paths to reach their goal: the job market. Timely guidance resources could certainly help them take the shortest route that best suits their situation.

Fourth observation

Awareness of educators in programs with a high concentration of adults concerning the characteristics and realities of this student population.

PARES measure:

3.1 *Supporting professional development initiatives for teaching staff and expertise development for college and university support staff.*

The diversity and characteristics of student populations make the job of teaching increasingly challenging.

College administrations and departments have an interest in providing training for teaching staff on the realities of the adult student population. Knowledge gained from research on the specific profiles of adult students, and data collected and analyzed locally in colleges, can be put to good use. Planning knowledge transfer activities adapted to local departmental realities would enable actors in the field to become familiar with research findings and use them for concrete applications. For example, based on research findings or data collected from adult students in a college, a deliberative workshop could be organized to bring together administrators, pedagogical counsellors, educational advisors and teaching staff to discuss problem situations and identify courses of action to better support this student population.

Fifth observation

Use of college services by adult students

PARES measures :

2.2 *Supporting the deployment of actions to improve the welcome and integration of students*

3.4 *Supporting colleges and universities in diversifying and promoting access to student services*

The analysis of data on adult students from the *Enquête sur la réussite à l'enseignement collégial* [Survey on Student Success at College, Ed.] based on data from the *Sondage sur la population étudiante des cégeps* [CEGEP Student Population Survey, Ed.] (SPEC) (Richard *et al.*, 2023) shows that a higher proportion of adult students than their younger counterparts say they

want to use a range of college services: library, loans and bursaries, help centre, computer lab, psychological support, student placement, health services. The testimonies collected in the longitudinal survey suggest that the services offered by colleges are a lever of action that can alleviate the difficulties encountered by these students, and even act as a protective factor against dropping out of school. It's worth noting that mental health issues were highlighted by 10 of the 25 adult dropouts we interviewed. The fact that so many respondents mentioned such mental health issues indicates a real need for this type of service. In particular, the stress experienced by adult students is very rarely trivial in their discourse. The crux of the matter is that, on the one hand, adapted services must be available for older students and, on the other hand, as mentioned above, they must be aware of their existence.

Sixth observation

Development of locally adapted actions and interventions

PARES measure:

3.3 Supporting local and national initiatives to encourage perseverance and success in higher education

The local dimension of this measure is very important for colleges to take into account, especially for programs of study. This measure is also in line with one of the 10 actions proposed to colleges by the Fédération des cégeps to improve student success, namely to continuously update and better use knowledge about the student population for intervention purposes (Lavoie & Prud'homme, 2022). Of course, it is possible to draw inspiration from what

is being implemented in one college or program, but what can be imagined and implemented in one college or program may not be applicable in another. It's important to take the time to understand the needs of the adult student community, to imagine different solutions or interventions, test them, and then evaluate them.

Conclusion

The problem of adult students dropping out of college is an area of intervention that is particularly in line with the measures set out in the PARES. In fact, the obstacles to success caused by situational, dispositional and institutional barriers could be mitigated through the implementation of adapted actions. Among these, taking into account the specific realities of adult students (measure 3.3), by responding with services that are accessible (measure 1.3), aligned with their needs (measures 2.2 and 3.4), and supported by teaching provided by professionals who are aware of the issues (measure 3.1), would be an example of an institutional action lever that is not negligible, and even beneficial from the point of view of dispositional barriers, considering, in particular, the important issues of mental health.

As for situational interventions, preventing adult students from dropping out can be done more concretely by offering favourable conditions based on their individual socio-economic conditions (measures 1.2 and 1.5). Providing favourable conditions for adult students also means thinking about the CEGEP of the 21st century in terms of the diversity of students' backgrounds (measures 1.1 and 2.3). Indeed, desiring and supporting

student success means providing learning environments that meet educational and skill development aspirations, but these environments must be inclusive and adapted to the diversity of personal paths. ■

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