

A DROPOUT AT UNIVERSITY

The aim of this article is to discuss developments in our approach and questions in relation to Mathieu¹, a university student who had previously dropped out of college. We are currently conducting a study funded by PAREA (Quebec's teaching and learning research-assistance program) that bears on college dropouts and non-formal education and informal learning situations. Our investigation focuses on interviews as the primary data-collection method; this is, in fact, how we originally met Mathieu. We meet with university students who, as he did, enroll in university after completing at least one full college session in a pre-university program, and are interested in individuals who drop out with at least the equivalent of one term remaining.

Our main question is simple: How can a student who has failed to complete his pre-university studies successfully complete university? This question opens up some interesting avenues of exploration, making it possible to revisit the concepts of non-completion, skills development, and learning situations.

Mathieu's academic journey, like that of other students, has been rather unconventional. Having frequented youth protection centres from ages 11 to 16, he attended school sporadically, dropping out on several occasions. When he enrolled in CÉGEP at age 18, he did not in fact have his high-school diploma, but was accepted with the provision that he obtain it (which he did, despite the extremely pessimistic predictions of his guidance counsellor). He attended CÉGEP for two and a half years, but did not pass the equivalent of his first year of Social Sciences, and ended up dropping out completely. Despite this fact, Mathieu decided to go to university. How likely is he to graduate?



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VOLUNTARY OR INVOLUNTARY NON-COMPLETION?

The school dropout rate has become a source of considerable worry among educational stakeholders, decision makers, and the general public; a 2011 Léger Marketing survey showed that the subject was Quebecers' second biggest concern². The Groupe d'action sur la persévérance et la réussite scolaires au Québec, led by L. Jacques Ménard, states that each dropout represents a shortfall of \$120,000 for the province; in total, this would constitute a "loss" of \$1.9 billion per cohort of dropouts (Groupe d'action sur la persévérance et la réussite scolaires au Québec, 2009). According to this statement, since dropping out reduces the number of degrees granted to young people, it is depriving society of what it increasingly needs: a highly qualified labour force.

The university students we met in the context of our research are, like Mathieu, college dropouts³. Some abandoned their studies because of a lack of interest or because they were disappointed by their college experience; others did so to work or travel. These individuals have since gone back to school after reaching age 21—the age at which they are entitled to attend university in Quebec as "mature students." Some had to take an exam, while others were initially considered auditing students before being admitted to a program (occasionally on the condition that they not fail a single course their first year).

Like Mathieu, these students, having already "flunked out of" college, see university as a formidable challenge. Despite the number of years that have passed, many still view themselves as dropouts. However, their profile is not consistent with the usual typologies.

To date, Tinto⁴ is the author most cited as regards such classifications. In 1994, he identified two types of dropouts.

¹ For reasons of confidentiality, we have used a fictional first name.

² LÉGER MARKETING. (September, 2011). *La valorisation de la diplomation, la persévérance scolaire et le plan d'action "L'école j'y tiens" au Québec*. [http://www.ledevoir.com/documents/pdf/Sondage_perseverance_scolaire.pdf].

³ There is a difference between the circumstances of high-school dropouts (who must, by law, remain in school until age 16) and college students who do not complete their studies. However, even though, strictly speaking, the two phenomena differ, we will use the term to describe both (Guigue, 1998, pp. 25-33; Rivière, 1996, p. 15).

⁴ "Tinto's theory of student departure is the most widely cited theory for explaining the student departure process and has reached 'near paradigmatic status' in the field of higher education" (Ma and Frempong, 2008, p. 4).



Those in the first group—“involuntary” dropouts—drop out because of academic failure: they have no choice. The second group is composed of “voluntary” dropouts: these individuals do not leave school because of low grades, but rather because they do not fit in to the academic environment or are not interested in what it has to offer. According to Tinto, it is this second type that should trouble us most.

After examining a number of cases of college dropouts attending university, however, we failed to find a clear distinction between the two. Some, like Mathieu, combine the characteristics of both categories: while they do have certain characteristics of involuntary dropouts—especially as regards marks and setbacks—they also present some of the attributes of voluntary dropouts, rejecting what college has to offer in order to pursue other activities. Mathieu’s case is edifying in this regard. Although he attended very few of his high-school and college classes, his response to other activities offered by the institutions in question was completely different. He describes himself as an idealist and has long been attracted by political commitment. As soon as he enrolled in CÉGEP, he became active in its student association. He also founded a separatist movement and organized a collective aimed at mobilizing the public with a view to overturning a government decision. This collective, which comprises thousands of people, has received support from a number of public figures, including a former premier. Mathieu also helped found a municipal political party and campaigned vigorously for a provincial party. While Mathieu did not succeed academically at the college level, it would appear he adjusted extremely well both to his own community and to student life.

In our view, because Mathieu failed a number of courses while putting considerable effort into student life, he does not correspond to either profile described by Tinto. Accordingly, can he realistically be termed a “voluntary” or an “involuntary” dropout? Is he in fact a “dropout” at all, given how he has managed to incorporate his extracurricular activities into his efforts to educate himself? Could he be qualified as a “dropout who is capable of learning?”

■ A DROPOUT CAPABLE OF LEARNING

The dropout period is often analyzed from the standpoint of motivation and self-esteem. According to Rivière (1996), for example, CÉGEP dropouts have not found the academic environment conducive to realizing their dreams—i.e., greater independence, an enhanced knowledge of self and the world, and the prospect of satisfying employment further down the line. Rivière identifies three phases of the dropping-out

process. The first—the pre-dropout period—is caused by inadequate academic orientation and a distorted view of the CÉGEP experience: in other words, the student fails to find what he or she expected of the school and is disappointed. In Mathieu’s case, the supposed benefits of his courses did not seem significant enough to justify the work involved. During the second period, a lack of self-confidence follows on the heels of that disappointment, leading to the actual act of dropping out. The third and final phase is the post-dropout period. As Rivière describes it, this period can be further divided into two stages: the first is comprised of a “moratorium” in which the individual takes stock of his or her life and explores employment opportunities. The second is characterized by a period of self-actualization during which the person begins to regain confidence and arrives at a clearer perception of him or herself. However, several university students we met did not experience this sequence of events. Mathieu is a good example: he never faced a “loss of self-confidence.” On the contrary, he gained self-assurance and acquired a number of skills despite dropping out, but did so via non-formal education and informal learning situations.

Our main question is simple: how can a student who failed to complete his pre-university studies graduate from university?

Non-formal education⁵ and informal learning situations were first examined in connection with adult-education development, which involved various techniques aimed at helping adults identify their experience and knowledge, often by means of complex interviewing methods such as abilities assessments, role-playing and interactive exchanges. The recognition of acquired competencies (RAC) is becoming increasingly popular in Quebec, with the Conseil supérieur de l’éducation [Higher Council for Education] (2000) stating that individuals should not have to relearn what they already know or learn to do what they are already doing. According to Martel (2007), RAC is developed mainly in occupational and technical programs.

⁵ For the purposes of this article, we are using the OECD definitions as quoted by Werquin (2010). Formal learning is “learning that occurs in an organised and structured environment and is explicitly designated as learning (in terms of objectives, time or resources)” (p. 21). Non-formal learning, on the other hand, is “embedded in planned activities not explicitly designated as learning (in terms of objectives, time or resources). It is intentional from the learner’s point of view” (p. 22). Informal learning “results from daily activities related to work, family or leisure. It is in most cases unintentional from the learner’s perspective” (p. 22).



Although universities have a number of means for recognizing such experiential learning, the same can be said only rarely of colleges. This also holds true for general education: even though in 2010 the Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport [Department of Education, Recreation and Sports] proposed a frame of reference for recognizing skills at the basic level, this process is still in the embryonic stage, as educational institutions have not developed a culture conducive to RAC for the pre-university sector and most students are unaware of the possibilities offered by RAC.

Mathieu identifies a number of skills he has developed thanks to his extracurricular activities: leadership, a sense of organization, enhanced interpersonal knowledge and the ability to adapt. Although these are undoubtedly difficult to measure, they are what Mathieu mentions most often when asked which skills have been most useful to him at university.

▶ A DROPOUT WITH SKILLS

The idea that academic success is based on various types of skills is far from new. For the last ten-odd years, however, more attention has been focused on skills that are not related to specific academic programs or subjects, but that apply equally to them all. These are what is known as “essential”, “generic” or “cross-curricular skills”. While not synonymous, these designations reflect the concept that certain skills help individuals meet the demands of the knowledge-based society of the 21st century, enter the labour market and equip themselves for independent learning.

The consensus on the importance of acquiring and recognizing such skills was established in the field of adult education, with the past 30 years being characterized by works and deliberations on the subject. Government policy, however, began reflecting the endeavours of the academic community only after UNESCO's Fifth International Conference on Adult Education held in Hamburg in 1997. The final declaration, of which Canada was a signatory, places a premium on non-formal education and informal learning in acquiring technical and professional qualifications, as well as on the development of more general skills that promote employability, academic success and personal development (UNESCO, 1997). This trend toward recognizing the significance of skills related more to personality, behaviour and basic abilities has also characterized the corporate milieu, which, for about 30 years, has made employee autonomy an essential condition for productivity enhancement (COCDMO, 2007).

In the early 2000s, several organizations attempted to identify these “essential”, “basic” or “generic” skills. In 2000,

the Conference Board of Canada established its list of “Employability Skills 2000+”⁶, and in 2003, the federal government defined nine essential skills⁷. In Quebec's college network, a consensus was reached recently on five “common competencies” that should be incorporated into any educational process. These competencies are: “solve problems”, “use creativity”, “adapt to new situations”, “exercise sense of responsibility”, and “communicate”. However, we are only at the trial stage⁸.

Could the non-academic experiences of voluntary college dropouts enable them to develop skills that adequately prepare them for university?

The question remains: why are these skills found less in regular educational curricula than in those for continuing education? According to Rachel Bélisle, from the Université de Sherbrooke's faculty of education, the problem is due primarily to a lack of recognition of the fact that informal-education activities can also result in the development of these skills. In her words, “because such learning is not formalized, institutions have trouble identifying it” (Bélisle, quoted in COCDMO, 2007, p. 8) [TR: translation]. However, the author applies this observation to the recognition of non-formal education and informal learning for adults with little formal schooling who find it difficult to enter the labour force. As we see it, it is possible to broaden the scope of this observation to include students who are currently pursuing an education (or attempting to do so). The experience of Mathieu, just like that of a number of other people we have met in the context of our research, testifies to that fact.

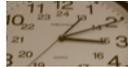
▶ 2,000 UNIVERSITY DROPOUTS

To get back to our original question: Can Mathieu graduate from university? At this point, we will let you in on a little secret: unlike what was implied at the beginning of this

⁶ These skills are defined as follows: Fundamental skills, or the skills needed as a base for further development (communicate, manage information, use numbers, and think and solve problems); personal management skills, or the personal skills, attitudes and behaviours that drive one's potential for growth (demonstrate positive attitudes and behaviours, be responsible, be adaptable, learn continuously and work safely); and teamwork skills, or the skills and attributes needed to contribute productively (work with others and participate in projects and tasks). (Conference Board of Canada, 2000, in COCDMO, 2007).

⁷ These skills are: reading, document use, numeracy, writing, oral communication, working with others, thinking, digital technology and continuous learning (HRSDC, 2004).

⁸ To date, two pilot projects implementing these five competencies have been conducted at the BeauceAppalaches and Marie Victorin CÉGEPs. For an account, see Côté (2012).



article, Mathieu is not just starting out. Now 23 years old, he completed an undergraduate degree in political science within the prescribed time limit. He is currently working on a Master's, in charge of communications for a human-resources management company, and, encouraged by his professors, considering doing a second Master's in Europe. Surprising, isn't it?!

Mathieu's educational pathway in some ways reflects the "unlikely educational pathway" concept that inspired Bourdon, Charbonneau, Cournoyer and Lapostolle (2007) in their research into the family, social networks and school completion. In their study, an "unlikely pathway" is defined as that taken by someone either deemed "at risk" who nonetheless obtains a degree ("uninterrupted unlikely pathway") or someone not so deemed who drops out ("interrupted unlikely pathway"). Mathieu obviously fits into the former category. The work of Bourdon *et al.* suggests that such individuals have many more extra-familial relationships with people having attained a post-secondary level of education than people characterized by other types of educational pathways. They also have more relationships with individuals they meet at work and during extracurricular activities—leading us to conclude that they may have a higher level of social integration, a fact that may partly explain their success. Could the experiences of voluntary college dropouts in a completely non-academic setting allow them to develop skills that adequately prepare them for university? If so, how can we explain that no relationship has ever been established between their personal plans and their education?

Some will say that such cases are rare, and that research like ours focuses on a marginal phenomenon. However, among dropouts in the pre-university sector, many still end up graduating from university. In fact, a study of Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport data (2004) on educational pathways shows that, of the 51,626 students admitted to university in the fall of 2002, 21,411 had no college diploma. Of that number, if we consider only those students who dropped out of college in Quebec, the retention rate after one year of university for 1,832 of these stood at 74.1%. In other words, after having enrolled in and then failing to complete college, three out of four of the some 2,000 students registered in a university program fulltime went on to successfully complete their first year. This fact is all the more remarkable when we consider that these are not people who, after having a career, decided to go back to school; the average age of college dropouts who enroll in university is 23.7. If we take account of individuals who enroll in university at a much later age (at retirement, for example), we can conclude that most of this

group is composed of people who begin their university studies as mature students (i.e., at age 21 or older). Thousands of college dropouts attend university. How many are like Mathieu?

CONCLUSION

The aim of this article was not to examine Mathieu's case in depth, but to sum up our thoughts. One thing is certain: Mathieu is far from unique. Hundreds of college dropouts go on to university every year, transferring skills acquired in all sorts of extracurricular situations. This simple fact makes us curious as to how these students acquire these skills and how colleges can interact with dropouts to support them in achieving their personal and professional goals. ●

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