

BRIEF TO THE MINISTER OF
EDUCATION AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Québec Colleges After 50 Years: a Look Back and a Look Forward

SUMMARY

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Conseil supérieur
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This document is a summary of the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation's brief *Les collèges après 50 ans : regard historique et perspectives*.

The full brief (in French only) as well the English version of its summary are available on the Conseil's website at www.cse.gouv.qc.ca.

INTRODUCTION

On June 29, 1967, the adoption of the *General and Vocational Colleges Act* by the Québec Government ushered in a major innovation in the Québec education system with the creation of a new level of instruction between secondary school and university. The first CEGEPs¹—which went on to rapidly expand and develop in ways that even the architects of college education could never have envisioned—opened their doors that year, and the fall of 2017 marked their 50th anniversary.

Wishing to acknowledge this event in its own style, the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation (CSE) has produced, on its own initiative, a brief on college education with two goals in mind: to revisit the 50-year history of colleges to highlight the major developments along their route, and at the same time lay the groundwork for discussion of the key issues and most pressing challenges in the advancement of college education in Québec.

50 YEARS OF COLLEGE EDUCATION IN QUÉBEC: FROM THE AIMS OF THE PARENT REPORT TO THE REALIZATION OF A GROUNDBREAKING IDEA

The CEGEP was created in 1967, at the height of the Quiet Revolution. Its roots can be traced back to the work of the Royal Commission of Inquiry on Education in the Province of Québec (Parent Commission), appointed by the Québec Government in 1961 and mandated to carry out an impartial and comprehensive review of the state of education in Québec as well as submit recommendations on courses of action in a report to the Lieutenant-Governor. The major overhaul of the entire education system that ensued in fact led to the very creation of the Ministère de l'Éducation (MEQ) and the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation.

The advent of CEGEPs represented an original and innovative contribution to a reorganization of the Québec education system. Founded on the modern principles of equal opportunity and accessibility, these institutions also rest on pillars that define their distinctive nature: democratization, geographical accessibility, free access, secularity, adaptable pedagogy and learning spaces, general education in a humanistic approach, a space to foster maturity in young people, guidance, versatility and multi-functionality. Over the years, these institutions have evolved through the challenges and advances that shaped them—at times in unexpected ways—to bring about the colleges we know today. In its brief, the Conseil presents an overview of the major defining moments in the 50-year history of colleges, organized in four key periods.

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1. Referred to as “institutes” by members of the Parent Commission, college-level institutions would go on to take the name of collèges d'enseignement général et professionnel (general education and vocational colleges) when they were created by the Ministère de l'Éducation. Their acronym—CEGEP—quickly gained in popularity as a noun. The present document uses the term “CEGEP” to refer to any public college. The term “college” is used in more general terms and can refer, depending on the context, to CEGEPs, subsidized and non-subsidized private colleges, government schools and institutions attached to a university, or even all college-level institutions.

The Development of Colleges and Their Search for Identity (1967–1979)

This period is marked by a rapidly-evolving college network across Québec, debates on the quality of education, challenges arising from the sharing of decision-making power in institutions and network, and from the relationships between colleges and unions (MEQ, 1978, p. 24), as well as the emergence of new ideas to help fine-tune the objectives and identity of college education. Efforts to establish colleges also proceed against a backdrop of political and social upheaval, exemplified by the 1968 student movement and the 1972 Common Front strikes by Québec public and para-public sector employees. These years of turmoil force the first evaluations of CEGEPs and indeed pave the way for the pedagogical and institutional development of colleges, notably through the hatching of college-specific concepts of institutional assessment, the program-based approach and basic training, upgrading of skills and research (Gingras, 1993, p. 4). The CEGEP, as of its infancy, thus becomes fertile ground for much innovation and experimentation. In some cases, this results in the implementation of groundbreaking and sustainable structures born of the will of actors in the college network, notably the adoption of a college-specific pedagogical niche, and educational support from research and testing consultants, along with the introduction of regional admission services and a network for training and professional development of college teachers (Performa). Toward the end of the 1970s, colleges also make their first forays into the field of research. College education gradually asserts its identity, and quickly gains international recognition for its core principles by experts at the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD):

We recognize that with the creation of CEGEPs, Québec deserves credit for having made some of the “most notable achievements” in post-secondary education. These [...] are founded on the principles of equal access and abolishing the “differentiation made in the values attached to general education and vocational education” by maintaining a contiguity between the two streams. OECD experts hence deem the CEGEP to be “an educational and sociopolitical model of great importance at an international level” (MEQ, 1978, p. 7, free translation).

Consolidating the College Education System: A Thriving College Culture (1980–1991)

During this period, the organization of college education is consolidated through the adoption of frameworks and mechanisms intended to assure the quality of instruction and training as well as student success, with evaluation, college autonomy and coherence of programs also on the agenda. This call for quality comes on the heels of the concern for equal opportunity and access (CSE, 1987), at a time when colleges need to adapt to the growing heterogeneity of the student population. In its re-reading of Book II of the Parent Report 25 years on, the Conseil reasons that CEGEPs have fully entered a new age of lifelong learning, as their mission is now deployed towards the vocational training of the labour force and a commitment to regional development and research (CSE, 1988, p. 99). With their sense of innovation as well as their ability to adapt and self-regulate, colleges establish, individually but particularly collectively, structures to address emerging needs.

The following examples developed in the network reflect this thriving culture inherent to college education: the creation of the Association québécoise de pédagogie collégiale (AQPC); the introduction of student services; the sharing of common tracking tools by admission services for educational pathways and research outcomes; the structuring of college-level research twinned with the creation of the Réseau Trans-Tech² and the Association pour la recherche au collégial (ARC); the collaborative efforts to meet the challenges of integrating ICTs in teaching and learning; the establishment of dedicated services promoting student life. The Conseil notes that during these years, the development of the college network demonstrates the agility of the institution, which transforms itself both in light of and due to social demand on the part of its social and economic partners, their regions and future students, youth and adult alike (CSE, 1988). This agility and partnerships between institutions will be highly sought after in the coming years to manage the major overhaul about to take place.

The College Reform and its Implementation (1992–2003)

This period is the time of the so-called renewal of college education, an important milestone in the history of colleges, with the changes in their mission as well as the greater autonomy granted to them confirming their membership in higher education. Numerous initiatives intended to reach the reform's objectives are launched in colleges, notably: defining competency-based programs; implementing a new pedagogical and evaluation paradigm to reflect a competency-based approach; developing an approach-based program; building evaluation tools. Following the abolition of the Conseil des collèges, the Commission d'évaluation de l'enseignement collégial (CEEC) is established as a corollary to the greater autonomy granted to colleges to manage their programs of study. Colleges are now required to have an Institutional Policy on the Evaluation of Student Achievement (IPESA) and adopt an Institutional Policy on Program Evaluation (IPPE) and demonstrate the quality of these policies and of their programs to the CEEC. Despite the hiring of additional resources, many of the responsibilities of educational advisors—previously assigned to mainly educational activities—are now largely migrated to these new tasks introduced by the reform. The renewal of teachers' professional practices also appears to be a major challenge during this period. Around the turn of the millennium, colleges are required to adopt a success plan and a few years later, a strategic plan that references the success plan and submit them to the CEEC for evaluation. Rallying behind the objective of student success, the college network establishes the Carrefour de la réussite au collégial. An increasingly diverse student population and a sharp uptick near the end of the 1990s in the number of students with learning disabilities—due in part to increased enrolment of students with mental health-related issues, ADD or ADHD—intensify the challenges associated with student success (Ducharme & Montminy, 2012). Yet despite some tension

2. The Réseau Trans-Tech is a network of specialized centres which would later adopt the name of centres collégiaux de transfert de technologie (CCTT, College Centres for the Transfer of Technologies).

during this period of upheaval, colleges pool their efforts to collectively address the trials of the renewal as well as those associated with student success. Certain aspects of the reform may still be works in progress, yet little doubt remains that it has fundamentally changed colleges.

Mature Institutions Facing 21st Century Challenges (2004–2017)

Colleges enter the new millennium on a solid footing inherited from the renewal of the previous decade. Greater institutional responsibility is now accompanied by increased accountability, as well as an obligation to demonstrate the quality of the training offered. The new form of public management introduced by the Government with its enactment of the *Public Administration Act* emphasizes results-based management and quality service to citizens. Governmental rules for the control of spending are becoming more cumbersome, and budgets earmarked for colleges come with quickly-mounting accountability. As a result, this recent period in the history of colleges is replete with initiatives and ideas on the development of college education that remain frustratingly incomplete in terms of any structural impact. In 2017 the Conseil even recommends to the Minister Responsible for Higher Education to consider the outcomes of these initiatives and engage in more in-depth dialogue with the network on the progress of organizing college education, convinced that the Minister has the facts and figures at hand to propose guidelines and courses of actions to the network and breathe new life into a college education more in line with current realities (CSE, 2017, p. 13). Nevertheless, the demand for rigour and the pursuit of quality raised during the previous decades are among some of the challenges colleges have successfully met. Both individually and as a network, they are continually proactive in adapting themselves to current realities, for example in meeting the needs of disabled students or sharing expertise in the recognition of prior learning and competencies.

Today, colleges are regarded as mature organizations, full members of the higher education system. The quality of the training offered in these institutions as well as their ability to assure it are among their noteworthy accomplishments. Over the decades they have been able to uphold the pillars that make up the distinctive nature of their level of instruction and at the same remain innovative in addressing emerging needs. Strengthened by their achievements, today colleges stand well-equipped to take on the new challenges and issues ahead, find new avenues for change and continue their development.

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES IN DEVELOPING THE QUÉBEC COLLEGE SYSTEM

Taking stock of the issues and challenges in developing college education can be a major undertaking, given the myriad facets of this level of instruction, all of which can be pivotal when seen under the lenses used to examine them. The Conseil has chosen to focus on a select number of key systemic and structural issues in order to identify pressing areas of concern. Its proposed overview of these issues consists in defining each through an examination of current realities in an effort to foster discussion on next steps.

This discussion rests on the fundamental notion that colleges represent an achievement of great importance for Québec society. The Conseil's assessment of the issues is thus meant to draw on such achievements to elicit a robust questioning of the development priorities for college institutions.

Revisiting and Redefining Accessibility

Colleges have effectively delivered on the needs and expectations of Québec society in opening up enrolment in higher education. This can be seen in the increase in the rate of access to college education, which jumped from 39.3% in 1975–1976 to 65.8% in 2015–2016. Today, nearly two-thirds of the Québec population go on to a college education.

Despite this resounding success, inequalities over access persist, depending on the region of origin and personal characteristics as well as the demographics of the individual. Challenges therefore remain to be addressed in order to achieve a more equitable access for all.

On the one hand, regardless of the allotment of colleges throughout Québec and the creation of centres for college studies over the years, the rate of access to college education remains lower in some regions, namely Nord-du-Québec, Abitibi-Témiscamingue, Outaouais, Côte-Nord, Gaspésie-Îles-de-la-Madeleine and Lanaudière. Any consideration of geographical access therefore cannot be decoupled from issues associated with the mapping of programs throughout Québec and the development of distance education. For example, how should the rollout of the former be pursued within the context of the latter's expansion?

On the other hand, an examination of accessibility based on individual characteristics and demographics also reveals continuing disparities in access. Despite the inroads made in terms of overall access to college education, some groups remain more at risk than others, i.e. boys, Indigenous people, first-generation students and immigrants. Socioeconomic background also continues to be one of the determining factors in access to post-secondary education and tends to indirectly benefit those with competencies acquired in the latter part of secondary school. Data presented by Doray (2018) on student trajectories in secondary school show an important gap between the rate of access to college by youth coming from the public network and those from the private network, in favour of those coming from the latter or from specialized programs in the former. Additionally, the data reveal, in the case of access for girls, a phenomenon of "segregative massification," in other words, a democratization that reproduces various forms of social discrimination (Doray, 2018). This phenomenon is evident in the choice of subjects both in technical and pre-university programs, where there are proportionally fewer girls in technology and natural science programs.

Concerns on access to college education have also shifted over time towards access to success. Regardless of gains made in first semester success rates and retention in the third semester, the rate of graduation two years after the projected duration of studies remains stagnant at 63.8% for the 2011 cohort. In the context of a diverse student population, the

challenge lies in leading the student population as a whole to succeed and graduate. According to Gaudreault et. al. (2018), boys, students aged 18 and over, those enrolled in a Springboard to a DEC (Diploma of College Studies), those who identify as disabled or are diagnosed with a disability, immigrants as well as first-generation students have lower success rates in the first semester. Lastly, recognition of prior learning also needs to be taken into consideration in access to graduation, given the context of labour shortages and increased immigration as well as the perspective of lifelong learning.

The issue of access to college education is thus a multifaceted and complex phenomenon to fully capture. Nevertheless, the data compiled and evidence from research validate that a number of challenges remain in attaining even greater equity in access.

Keeping Pace With Current Student Realities

Young people attending college today come with their very own characteristics, behaviours and values, they follow a variety of paths and are growing up in a world that has evolved considerably over the past 50 years. In addition, an increasingly diverse student population is now accessing college studies. These factors all combine to pose challenges in adapting college education.

In its brief, the Conseil outlines several current student realities that need to be considered in adapting college education. Students have education and life paths that are steadily becoming less linear, their studies last slightly longer, career choices are slow in coming for a good number of them, and they tend to work while in still in school. The Conseil also points out how the social context influences student behaviours, namely in the use of digital technologies, a must-have competency in the 21st century, as well as in the interest of students in mastering a second language.

Keeping these in mind, the Conseil proposes four areas to consider in addressing the challenges of delivering a college education that keeps pace with student realities. First, the need for a consensus in updating general education and providing it with real scalability. Second, the importance of funding to ensure the maintenance and development of student support and guidance structures. Third, the adaptation of college pedagogy to student diversity and evolving digital technologies, and a new definition of the teacher's role as a broker between knowledge and the student. Last, a greater flexibility in organizing college education in terms of programs of studies as well as training formats.

The overview of the current situation outlined by the Conseil thus suggests a broad questioning of the rigid and highly standardized college education model. Given evolving student characteristics and needs as well as rapid social change, colleges will need to implement an adequate response.

Toward More Fluid Student Pathways

Firmly rooted in higher education, colleges are now recognized for the quality of their training and their contribution to the development of Québec society. Their position at the

crossroads of secondary school, university and the labour market nevertheless poses certain challenges in ensuring the fluidity of student pathways between them. Over the past 20 years, a number of collaborative initiatives between the different levels of instruction have been taking place to help increasingly more students who follow atypical pathways move from one level to the next.

For the most part, the student population in programs leading to a DEC are holders of a DES (Diploma of Secondary Studies) in the youth sector. What is now needed are efforts to optimize the transition process for youth coming from other sectors, notably vocational training. With a few exceptions, the experiments of integrated DEP-DEC Springboard programs have thus far been inconclusive. An in-depth analysis of the obstacles in play is needed to ensure that efforts invested are not continually in vain, with a concurrent re-examination of the goals of programs leading to a DEP (Diploma of Vocational Studies), which were not originally conceived with continuity of pathways in mind.

As for links with universities, the 30% rate of technical DEC holders entering university shows a need for integrated DEC-BAC programs. In the coming years, colleges and universities will need to consolidate these links to preserve fluidity of pathways within the post-secondary education system. In the case of pre-university programs, the rate of direct enrolment into university studies hovered around 80% in 2011. The Conseil believes pre-university—a preparatory step to university studies unique to Québec—allows students to develop work methods and habits in a context of higher learning and firm up their choice of career. However, some of the challenges that persist are found in linking training content between the two levels, as revealed by the current revision of the Science Program. Added to this is the pressure of the R score used as a primary admission criterion in most university programs with limited enrolment. This can affect the potential of students to fulfill their aspirations—for example, in the case of a challenging transition to college, which results in lower scores during the first semester.

Beyond the concerns related to linkage between the different levels, the Conseil deems that colleges need deeper roots in higher education and should explore developing new training structures and models. Indeed, in a context where professional working conditions require the upgrading of professional competencies, the Conseil in a 2015 brief undertook an analysis designed to provide more certification options for colleges to better align training needs, upgrading of qualifications and increasingly sophisticated fields of knowledge.

Lastly, the Conseil highlights the challenges of internal coherence in college education and emphasizes a few aspects of the different operating models between the regular education and continuing education sectors. Firstly, a wide variance can be seen between the autonomy granted to institutions in managing programs leading to an AEC (Attestation of College Studies) and that for DEC programs, a variance that suggests confidence in continuing education is greater than that in regular education. The rules for the training offer in the two sectors also differ in such a way so as to complement each other in a sense. The Conseil noted that the vast majority of AEC program objectives lie in initial training,

while the official line on these programs suggests that they are intended primarily for adults seeking to upgrade or further specialize their skills. This distinction in the way regular education and continuing education operate in colleges raises many questions that are best left for a future date to avoid clouding a shared vision of the issues transcending these two sectors.

Stewardship of the College Education System

Colleges have reached a mature phase as institutions and now find themselves at a pivotal stage in their development. Structural changes will need to be considered to ensure their ability to continue fully meeting the expectations and needs of society. Our rapidly-evolving world demands great adaptability on the part of the institution. Yet despite leadership and the sense of initiative that characterizes them, colleges cannot tackle the large-scale challenges that lie ahead on their own. The stewardship of the education system by the Government and the Ministère de l'Éducation et de l'Enseignement supérieur is crucial in taking the next step toward the development of college education and assuring the overall coherence of the education system.

The Conseil believes that this stewardship must primarily be embodied in a vision of college education, defined jointly with college players so as to guide policy and encourage the involvement and commitment of the latter. It also demands an effective sharing of responsibilities between the Ministère and colleges, together with the necessary investment in resources so each can efficiently carry out its role in assuring the quality of college education. For example, timely measures will need to be taken to assure an efficient review process of technical programs. Funding in general is of concern among many stakeholders. A call is being made for the Government to reinvest and recoup the shortfall in earnings due to budget cuts and stabilize funding in a predictive, flexible and streamlined financial framework, as well as adjust the parameters of funding models to better cover the different facets of the CEGEP's mission, the current realities in institutions and the diverse student population and their pathways. Conversely, the provision of financial resources, with its concomitant requirement of accountability, can lead to a heavy bureaucracy in colleges. A balance remains to be struck to ensure that resources and energy invested in accountability do not come at the expense of institutional development, in order to proactively rather than reactively manage governmental rules and frameworks. If expanded responsibilities inevitably come with line-by-line external oversight, the ability of colleges to innovate risks being hamstrung, particularly in cases where there is a shortfall in financial resources.

College education players also influence the stewardship of the system. However, they need to find ways to build consensus around development paths and avoid individual interests putting the brakes on the development of colleges and impinging on the common good to which they all are called to contribute. Some of the contentious ideas—the expanded autonomy of colleges, a more targeted offer of training pitted against the notion

of standardized training and diploma—have certainly tarnished the most unsuccessful attempts to reorganize college education.

The Conseil can nonetheless attest to the strong consensus that exists on the need for leadership on the part of the Government and the Ministère in implementing structural measures to develop the college education system. It wishes to reiterate the importance of placing education, a fundamental value for Québec society, among the highest of policy priorities.

CONCLUSION

Without a doubt, colleges at the age of 50 are enjoying a reputation for the quality of the training they offer and their contribution to the advancement of Québec society. They have been successful in preserving the core principles that shaped their identity while being innovative, both individually and collectively, in meeting emerging needs and fostering student success. The Conseil reaffirms the currency of key ideas that presided over the creation of colleges five decades ago and which have lent them their uniqueness. These big ideas now need to be seen through the lenses of current realities and issues at stake. Colleges have entered a new era of their history, strengthened by their valuable achievements and appearing better positioned to face the realities of a world that is increasingly more complex, fast-evolving and whose needs are ever expanding. Without trying to be exhaustive in its review of the issues or prematurely take a stance, the Conseil has sought through this overview to contribute to the dialogue on what needs to be considered in defining future directions for their development and the development of college education in Québec.

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