

# Reform cohort graduates to CEGEP

## Too soon to judge how active learning has shaped students, researchers argue

BY BRENDA BRANSWELL, THE GAZETTE AUGUST 24, 2010



Students wander through the Westmount campus of Marianopolis College. The overall increase in applications for this fall at Montreal Island CEGEPs was 8.7 per cent. But it was nearly double that - 17.2 per cent - at English colleges.

**Photograph by:** Allen McInnis, STF

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Call them trailblazers, or guinea pigs if you think they got the short end of the education stick.

The new students pouring into CEGEPs this week are the first cohort of high school graduates who have learned exclusively under Quebec's education reform.

They're an unknown quantity to CEGEPs and are bound to come under scrutiny as the school year unfolds.

They're graduates of the "competency-based" curriculum introduced in Quebec schools in 2000 that promotes the idea of students participating more actively in their learning.

Critics worry not enough emphasis has been placed on learning essential knowledge.

But what do we really know from a more scientific point of view about how the curriculum has shaped the first-year CEGEP students?

Not that much yet, it seems.

"I find that people have said a lot about the reform without having seen conclusive results," said Simon Larose, a professor at Université Laval who is leading a longitudinal study looking at the impact of the reform on high school students.

The research team will deliver its first report in December 2011 and a final one a year later.

Quebec's Education Department mandated the study in 2007. It involves three high school cohorts of about 1,200 to 1,300 students each -two that have studied under the reform and one pre-reform group. It's the first time there will be comparative data at high school, Larose said of the reform study.

Students and their parents are questioned at different points during the study. School administrators and teaching consultants have also been asked to weigh in on questionnaires.

The study will also compare student results from the Grade 11 provincial French exam and a mathematics exam inspired by the PISA test, an internationally standardized assessment given to 15-year-olds in different countries, including Canada. The comparative data from the math test is expected to be released next spring.

Last fall, an Education Department committee suggested ways that CEGEP teachers could help post-reform graduates integrate into college. It's important to diversify such teaching methods as lectures, teamwork, exercises and research, the report said. That's because reform graduates are accustomed to a variety of teaching strategies and participate actively in their learning.

"However, because they are used to active participation, they have difficulty concentrating over long periods of time," the report added.

The committee also said it might be helpful to administer diagnostic tests at the beginning of the year in courses that require previous learning, to assess students and get to know their strengths and weaknesses.

John Abbott College, for example, gave a diagnostic test to incoming science students last year as a baseline, and plans to do the same this fall as a point of comparison for where gaps in knowledge may exist.

"For us, it's definitely going to be a fluid period over the next few years while we adjust to the students coming in with different strengths and different exposure in their backgrounds," said Karim Jaffer, a John Abbott physics teacher who is involved in several initiatives preparing for the reform cohort.

Jaffer said he believes students in the technology stream will feel a little more prepared for the style of work at the CEGEP level. "They are very much more project-based, hands-on programs. There's a fair amount of group work in several of the technologies and a lot more application, and the learning style typically matches the students who will go into those programs," he said.

In the pre-university stream, Jaffer said, there is a mix of students with different learning styles but the content is covered in a way that's much more "teacher down," such as through lectures.

"One of the big misconceptions about the reform is that (it) is something that is kind of foreign, and it's only in Quebec and it's this completely mysterious beast," Jaffer said. "Whereas really it tries to capture best practices in teaching."

Whatever emerges from the initial reform research must recognize implementation issues, Jaffer said. "It's going to take a few years within the secondary system for the implementation to kind of smooth itself out and (for) the evaluation techniques and everything to reach a consistent standard."

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