

HOW DO CAREER

SECTOR STUDENTS REALLY FEEL

ABOUT GENERAL EDUCATION?

RESEARCH



The relevance of general education courses¹ in technical/career DEC programs is repeatedly the subject of debate. Some contend that in addition

to being annoying to students these courses are the cause of the high dropout rates in some technical/career programs. At the request of the organizers of the forum on technical/career education held in January 2002, we set out to see how students really felt about these courses.

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During semi-directive interviews, we recorded what 127 students registered in technology DEC programs³ in several French Cégeps had to say about each of their courses. We were not surprised by their reserved and often negative comments, spontaneously given, on general education courses, in particular French, *Philo* and English. However, more detailed discussion showed that students have a more moderate opinion than what initially appeared. Further probing also revealed that it is possible to do something to enhance interest and to improve student success in general education. The most obvious finding to emerge from our research is that teachers are at the heart of the interest or disinterest the students have in general education courses. Students claim that a “good teacher” can overcome the harshest prejudices toward a discipline. Competence regarding course material and pedagogy, dynamism, a sense of humor and the ability to communicate well with students are qualities that arouse interest and encourage students to attend class. But the opposite is equally true: teachers who do not appear to grasp the course material, or who are arrogant or scornful, who lack clarity in their explanations or who are described as being “blasé” or “boring” may, in spite of themselves, seriously compromise the interest of students, not only for a particular class but also for an entire discipline and sometimes even for college studies altogether. The overall attitude of students is positive, and several of them were relieved to note that the apprehension they had

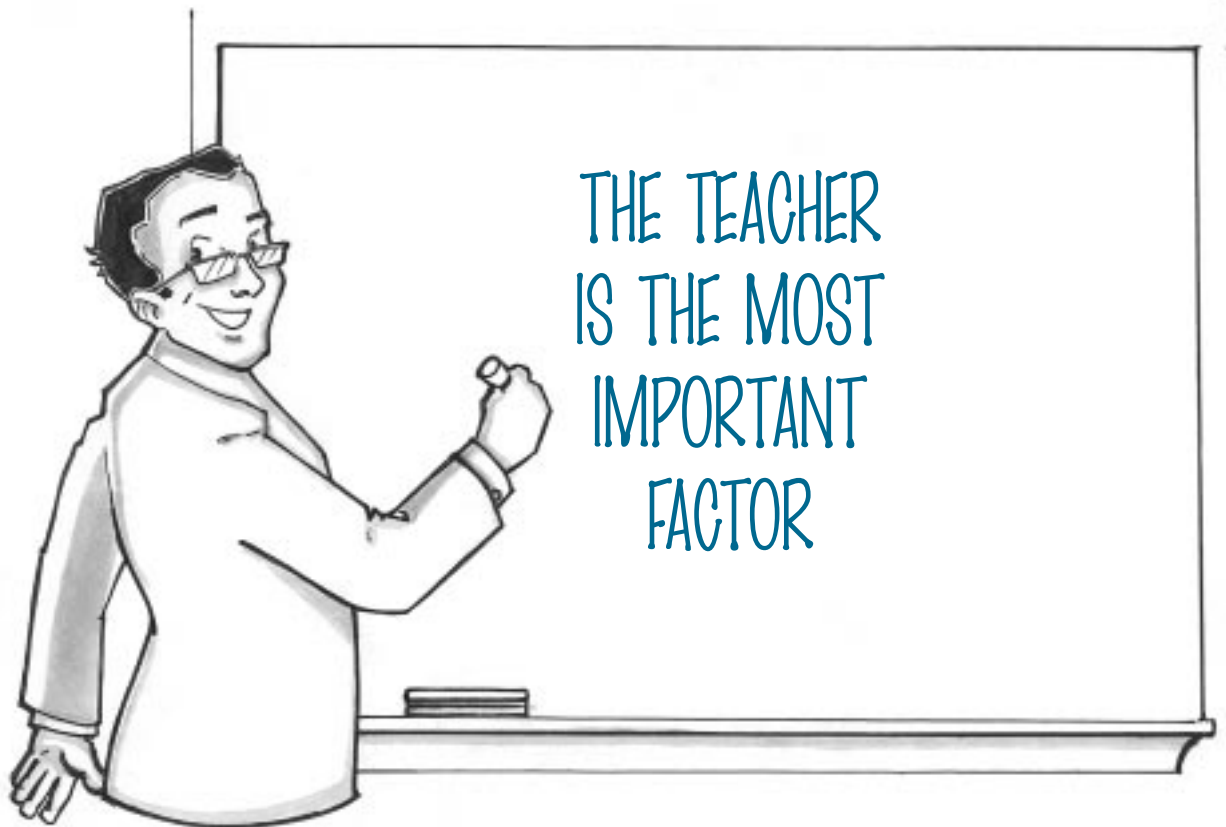
regarding teachers before entering college had proven unfounded, given that they now felt teachers were rather sympathetic and accessible and that they made contact easily with the students.

The usefulness of general education courses was also a topic that came up during the interviews. Contrary to popular belief, however, many students recognize that these disciplines are potentially useful in their life: they helped them become more rounded and interesting individuals or, simply, taught them to read and to write properly. Some also consider general education as “value added” to their DEC, compared to other diplomas (DEP or AEC for example), and are proud to say that they will be people “who will be able think.” This did not prevent a great number of students, in particular adults and recent immigrants, to wonder about the place of literature and philosophy courses in a program they chose because it led to a technological trade. Here again, the role of the teacher can prove to be pivotal in the transformation of attitudes.

Moreover, it is clear that students’ attitudes toward general education are partly a collective phenomenon. Among young men especially, it is far more acceptable to express passion for technological matters than for literary analysis or philosophy. Under the cover of anonymity and in the rather intimate environment of the interview, several individuals nevertheless

“admitted” liking and sometimes being enthralled by general education courses even when they had maintained that “everyone” hates the mandatory courses. Several students felt that because general education courses are mandatory they are in direct competition with program-specific courses because the latter stem from personal decision and often seem more concrete. Interestingly, all students appreciate having a choice, albeit a restricted one, whether it is the sport practiced in physical education or the subject of an oral presentation.

Besides agreeing on the strong influence of individual teachers, students held widely varied views regarding the disciplines of general education. Physical Education is the most liked while English, second language on the contrary, is often considered a tedious subject whose utility is nonetheless recognized by just about all, which helps maintain interest. Many positive comments were heard about *Philo* courses, although this discipline may appear impenetrable or even strange to those studying it for the first time. As for French language and literature courses, students are generally relieved to find that grammar is no longer part of the curriculum, while many others are perplexed and afflicted with a disturbing feeling of incompetence. Many students feel neither ready nor interested in studying literature, in particular that of the Middle Ages, and do not grasp very well what is being asked of them. Reading is laborious; writing is painful. Burdened with



“thousands” of words to write, students have difficulties spelling and structuring their ideas. A lack of imagination, which young women complained of in particular, was also deemed a serious problem. When these obstacles cannot be overcome, tests often seem “unjust”, and students do not understand the evaluation criteria determining their final grade. Mother tongue difficulties play a significant role in other general education courses, *philo* in particular.

Most people experiencing problems in these subjects spoke openly, whether the source was general disinterest or academic weakness. When faced with a “bad teacher” in general education, some students will drop the course at the beginning of the semester, which reduces the particularly heavy schedule of some technical programs. When they resist their first impressions but then feel the situation becoming more difficult, some said that they “work harder” in the hope of catching up. Taking a course the semester after having failed it does not appear to be a favored strategy. Many try to avoid the course and claim they will take it again “later,” “in the summer” or at some unspecified moment. As for language learning centers, just about all students know of their existence, but very few plan to use them, preferring to solve their problems by themselves.

Such negative strategies interfere with student progress and can lead some to abandon their studies completely, in particular when the

anxiety of facing a failed course over again is stronger than the will to obtain the coveted DEC. Although it is true that action is required to help overcome the difficulties that technical/career program students have with general education, it would be an exaggeration to claim that these courses are the cause of the high dropout rates in some programs. Although we met two or three people who claimed college was not for them because of their difficulties in French or Philosophy, these situations are rare. The overwhelming majority of students who dropped out of their program during the first year of studies associated their decision to a lack of interest for the program, difficulties with the subject matter or other reasons often unrelated to education.

We should not be surprised to find that career sector students attach more importance to program-specific courses, because these courses, like the professors who teach them, embody not only an academic discipline but also a chosen profession. As for general education courses, their objectives seem unrelated to the plans of the students, who do not immediately recognize their usefulness. This does not mean, however, that students in technical/career programs hold general education in low esteem. Our research convinced us that teachers who manage to put these students at ease on pedagogical, disciplinary, and personal levels, can have a positive and immediate impact on their interest, their motivation and their success.

The comments of students on general education presented in this article are drawn from a wider research project focusing on the education patterns of science and technology students. Approximately 250 students from six colleges, of which nearly 130 were registered in technical programs, voluntarily discussed their academic and professional experience, their program and career choices and their plans for the future within the framework of interviews carried out on several occasions during their course of study. Feel free to visit our Web site and to contact us to learn more! www.unites.uqam.ca/cirst/releve

¹ French (language and literature), *Philo*, English (second language) and Physical Education were the courses regarded as belonging to general education for the purposes of this study.

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³ The study looked at science and technology students in Quebec and studied their study paths in Computer Science, Electrical Engineering Tech. and Chemical Tech. The generalization of our results to all programs in the technical sector, and in particular to the social technologies, should be done cautiously, if at all.