

Symposium: *We all have our parts to play: The roles of students, peer-mentors and administration in creating pathways to higher education and student success for minority-language students*

Paper 4: Creating conditions for student success in a context of linguistic heterogeneity – an institutional perspective

Results from Lamoureux (2007, 2008, 2010) and focus groups that we led with undergraduates students at the University of Ottawa in 2010-2011 demonstrate that our students who come from regions in Ontario where the French language is highly minoritized - regions where very little French language and culture are prominent in the community - develop strong feeling of linguistic insecurity when arriving on campus at the University of Ottawa (Desabrais, 2008). When meeting their peers from Quebec or regions of Eastern Ontario where French is either the dominant language or visibly present in the community, students from highly minoritized communities realize that there is a significant linguistic gap. As they integrate the academic community, they are confronted by a gap between their repertoire and that valued in a Francophone academic setting. The ensuing linguistic insecurity lingers for several months and even years. Many students who chose the University of Ottawa explicitly to study in French feel compelled to transfer to English language programs. This is contrary to the University of Ottawa's mission to ensure the vitality of Ontario's Francophone minority community. It also became evident that there was a need to perform an exhaustive analysis of institutional data on students registered in our French as medium of instruction undergraduate programs, to quantify and describe the breadth and depth of a particular reality brought to light during our preliminary qualitative explorations in 2010-2011.

The peer-to-peer mentoring program, which is the subject of this symposium, was implemented in January 2011 in order to support Francophone minority students as they transition to the University and integrate socially and academically into the bilingual community. Peer mentor provide First year Francophone students with positive role models who can identify and help them access various university services to help them bridge the linguistic gap and stop linguistic insecurities from settling in. We deemed essential to document the implementation of this program to evaluate its effectiveness, propose modifications as needed and explore the capacity for knowledge mobilization to other students groups from non-traditional pathways at the University of Ottawa and at other PSE institutions. A research project was developed to shadow the implementation of the peer-to-peer mentoring program.

As indicated, the mentoring was put in place based on feedback provided by Francophone students from highly minoritized regions enrolled in our

undergraduate programs during focus groups conducted in 2010-2011. Several members of the Registrar's office, the Liaison office and even the Vice-president academic sat in on focus groups. Furthermore, we invited a senior administrator for the French language school boards from the various regions to meet with their former students. This partnership helped each of the institution to identify what role they could play in facilitating access, success and persistence in higher education for these students.

When designing our research project, we felt it important to allow for real-time monitoring and exploration of other strategies based on research in Belgium and France, but analyzed from an Ontarian perspective informed by research on PSE and ethnolinguistic vitality. Based on findings documented in September-October 2011 which identified important gaps in university literacy preparation of our Freshman students, we were able to meet with members of Belgium's *Commission Réussite* (Parmentier, 2011) in December 2011 to examine practices and policies implemented at the various French as medium of instruction universities to explore what knowledge could be mobilized within the Ontario PSE context.

Implementing a centralized program within a decentralized institution, such as the peer mentoring, presented some challenges. However, the findings of the program provided and analysed in real time allowed for the identification of key practices that would be essential to support the transition to university for students from a variety of geographical regions and academic pathways, regardless of language, as well as key issues that are particular to the Francophone minority linguistic group.

With the massification of access to further and higher education, increased internationalisation from within and without, as well as increased participation of students from a variety of non-traditional pathways (college transfers, adult learners, stop outs returning to school, immigrant recertification), more and more institutions must reassess how to meet the needs of a increasingly diverse student body and ensure conditions that lead to success.

In this paper, drawing on our findings and experience with the peer-to-peer regional mentoring program, we will highlight how this project has informed and continues to inform university policy and services at the University of Ottawa from an administrative perspective, how it has changed our perceptions on institutional data analysis, and the importance of collaboration with research teams. Finally we will provide insights on which findings could be transposed to other institutions, in a variety of settings.

References

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