

Symposium: 'Getting to know you': Understanding students' interface with university services to improve the student experience

Paper 1: Ensuring a quality student experience: we all have our parts to play

This paper will provide the broad strokes of the theoretical and methodological considerations as well as the context of a new initiative implemented at North America's largest bilingual university, the University of Ottawa. The 'Cohort project' aims to ensure that student voice and experience inform institutional transformation in order to improve the quality of student experience for all students.

Ontario, like many other educational jurisdictions, wishes to increase the further and higher education of its citizens. In 2010, it set a target of 70 per cent by 2020, up from 63 per cent. Luckily, the province boasts both the largest number of public institutions of further and higher education in Canada. However, despite increased targeted immigration, the province institutions have not been showing growth rates. Rae (2005) concluded that increasing participation in further and higher education is dependent on raising the participation rates of 5 traditionally underrepresented groups and increasing the participation of students other than direct admissions from secondary school. In Ontario, Francophones remain underrepresented, particularly in higher education (Labrie, Lamoureux & Wilson, 2009 ; Lennon, Zhao, Wang & Gluszynski, 2011).

Massification of further and higher education is transforming the student population (Erich, 2004; Klein & Pierret, 1994; Monballin et al., 1995; Parmentier, 2006, 2011; Pollet & Delforge, 2011; Salmon et al., 2011), and students can no longer be seen as arriving as homogeneous cohorts. This new reality is amplified when we take into account the internationalisation of higher education. We see a proliferation of research on access and the student experience (Hernandez & Lopez, 2004; LeSure-Lester & King, 2005; Watson, Terrell, Wright et al., 2002), as well as increase needs to serve a multicultural student body (Jones, 2010; Montgomery, 2010; Pope, Reynolds & Mueller, 2004; Thomas & Tight, 2011; Turner & Robson, 2008). Many of these studies address the internationalisation of the university and its increased diversity (Chan, 2004; Jing, 2008; Taylor, 2004). Yet, how does one transform the institution to meet the needs of international students if we do not have a clear understanding of how we are meeting (or not) the needs of a diverse national population?

The University of Ottawa, North America's largest bilingual postsecondary institution, has a specific mandate to meet the needs of Ontario's French first-language minority community. As such, the University must serve its students in the official language of their choice, French or English. This is true from its Web pages, to services at Financial Affairs, student services, custodial and food services, to classroom instruction, etc. In the Fall of 2012, total undergraduate and graduate program enrolment at the University neared 45,000 students, of which less than a

third are Francophone and about 1,500 are pursuing a French immersion program. Diversity within this institution goes beyond the French-English divide, as it draws its student body from all regions of Ontario and Canada, and around the world, with international students choosing to register in either Francophone or Anglophone programs.

In 2011-2012, the University of Ottawa implemented a peer-to-peer mentoring program to better meet the needs of one part of their first-year student cohort: francophones from regions where the French language is minoritized (author et al., 2013). This program was unique for several reasons, but most notably for the diversity of its coordinating team, which brought together senior administrators, a director of student services and a junior researcher. This team quickly realised that individually, they were all trying to address the same challenges, and that collectively, they could better work to meet students' needs if they could inform their practice with research data and findings. A closer look at some of the tools developed to inform decision-making for the peer-to-peer mentoring program revealed just how important they could be to inform institutional transformation (Thomas & Tight, 2011) through student voice (Jones, 2010). This observation led to the creation of the 'Cohort project', led by a cross-sectorial steering committee, to document and analyse as many interactions as possible, in real time and after the fact, between students and various university services, for a cohort of 2,000 1st entry, 1st year university students, from May 2012 to April 2013. The intent was to track what services were being accessed at what time of the year, for what reasons, and if possible, to determine how students felt about services received or if they followed up with referrals to other services, in order to get a better understanding of all the interactions students have with the university and its services outside of classrooms.

This paper will: 1) outline the context of the project, 2) highlight its theoretical and methodological underpinnings, 3) provide an overview of the evolution of questions that guided the steering committee and 4) discuss the importance of a cross-sectorial project team that wished to accurately document the implementation of this projet. As such, this paper will lay the foundation for the rest of the symposium. (811)

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