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## An education in special needs

### Cegeps are finding ways to accommodate an increasing number of students who have learning disabilities and mental health issues

BY BRENDA BRANSWELL, THE GAZETTE AUGUST 22, 2011 7:30 AM



First-year Dawson student Émilie Larose, 17, was diagnosed with dyslexia this year. "I just knew that I had to work harder and learn differently than others," she said.

**Photograph by:** John Kenney, The Gazette

Émilie Larose's first CEGEP class doesn't start until Wednesday, but she's already into the spirit of things with her new Dawson College hoodie, T-shirt and tote bag.

"I'm actually very excited," said Larose, 17, a bilingual francophone from Ste. Thérèse who will be studying general social sciences at Dawson.

Her path to higher education hasn't been without obstacles.

Larose was diagnosed with dyslexia this year.

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She said she has always earned good grades - "because I was really hard on myself" - although her French marks lagged behind. They shot up and her other grades improved as well once she got extra help this year in Grade 11, Larose said.

Her study tricks have included rewriting her notes or reading out loud and writing at the same time so it sinks in.

"I just knew that I had to work harder and learn differently than others," she said.

Larose is one of the growing number of students with special needs in Quebec's CEGEP system. There has been a striking increase in students with special needs - specifically those with learning disabilities, attention deficit and mental health problems, says the Fédération des cégeps, which represents Quebec's 48 public colleges.

The number of students with learning disabilities rose from 504 in 2007 to 2,563 in 2010, and those with mental health problems climbed from 73 to 384 during the same time period, according to the federation's figures. (It considers those numbers conservative.)

CEGEPs started counting those students in 2007 and providing more official services, said Carole Lavallée, who is responsible for CEGEP du Vieux Montréal's service for helping students' integration. The service is also a support and reference point on the topic for other French and English colleges in western Quebec.

There are several theories about the increase, Lavallée said. Young children are better diagnosed and offered services more quickly in elementary and high school. Many who didn't make it to Grade 11 before because there wasn't support are now doing so, she said.

Students with special needs are admitted on the basis of marks, through the same CEGEP admission process as others, Lavallée noted.

Students with special needs are being integrated earlier, given support and succeeding, said Alice Havel, a counsellor with Dawson College's Student AccessAbility Centre. "I think there is the expectation that these students can go on to college and university and be successful," Havel said.

Dawson probably has the largest number of students with special needs, Havel said. For this semester alone, its Student AccessAbility Centre has already registered more than 300 students. It offers services to help students with documented disabilities pursue their studies. Some students self-identify and seek out the help, others don't, Havel said.

The centre helps students with registration and making up their schedules. "We have students, for example, with attention deficit who take medication and who function best early in the day," Havel said. "So let's not start giving them 4 p.m. classes when their medication is worn."

Staff fill out forms spelling out a student's learning disability and what they will need. For instance, a student who has trouble following oral instructions may need to approach a teacher after class for clarification, Havel said. The centre asks students to bring the form to their teachers. "I think it's that whole thing that now they have to self-advocate, and we really have to work on that," she said.

Exam accommodation is another service. Students may have extra time to complete exams or they may need a quieter room to write in, Havel said. The exam room with computer terminals in the centre's office is used for that purpose. A student with dyslexia can have exam questions read to him or her by the computer. The computer can also read back what the student has written. Text can also be enlarged or produced in Braille for visually impaired students, Havel said.

Larose said extra time for exams is best for her. "I wouldn't get as good a grade as I could because reading took more time.

"Every small thing you can do, it makes a huge difference," Larose said. "It's like you're learning without your disability."

A lot of what students need is in the classroom, and on one level, that's not directly a monetary issue, Havel said. The concept of a universal design of instruction calls for designing a course to be accessible to the broadest number of students in the classroom, she said. "If we can get more teachers thinking about accessibility in their courses, then I think that's going to take away the need for as much accommodation."

A year ago, college teachers were worried about "reform" students - the first cohort of high school graduates who studied exclusively under Quebec's new curriculum, entering CEGEP last fall - said Jean Trudelle, head of the Fédération nationale des enseignantes et des enseignants du Québec. It didn't turn out to be a big problem, he said, but the teachers' union heard many comments about students with special needs. "It's become the subject that worries teachers a lot now, because they've indeed noticed that there has been quite a big increase," Trudelle said.

"Right now the big fear is that there aren't enough resources to deal with this new situation," he said.

Colleges have long received funding for students with physical disabilities, said Caroline Tessier, a spokesperson for the Fédération des cégeps. It amounts to about \$6 million to \$7 million a year, she said. The federation also wants at least \$13 million allocated annually for colleges to help students with learning disabilities, attention deficit and mental health problems. CEGEPs received an extra \$3 million in recurring funds in the 2011-12 provincial budget for those students in addition to money that had been set aside for pilot projects, Tessier said.

"It's the first time there is an official recognition of (this) clientele," she said.

"It's the first step in the right direction."

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