

HEQCO

Access and Retention Consortium University of Ottawa

Beyond Access: Student Persistence and Success

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Overview

In the past few years, Patrick Gaudreau's research team has developed and validated the Promotion of Academic Success of Students (PASS) with anglophone students. PASS is a retention initiative designed to help first-year students set academic goals, plan for achieving those goals, and cope with the challenges and stressors of their university lives, with the overall goal of improving academic performance and retention. Retention remains an issue for francophone students at the University of Ottawa even though they have comparable access rates to anglophone students. Because the PASS program has demonstrated positive results for the anglophone population, this project seeks to translate, adapt and pilot this program among the francophone population, with the goal of replicating its impact.

Francophone students at the University of Ottawa show more diversity than anglophone students in their backgrounds and pathways to pursuing university studies. Francophone students enrolled at the University of Ottawa include a growing number of international francophone students and Quebec CÉGEP students. The university also attracts approximately half of the francophone high school students pursuing university education in Ontario. Data suggest that francophone students from Ontario show regional differences in access and retention. For example, francophone students from rural areas in northern and eastern Ontario are more likely to attend college, whereas francophone students from central southwestern Ontario are more likely to attend university. The project examines the impact of the PASS program on the academic achievement, persistence and retention rate of francophone students to inform how to effectively institutionalize the PASS program at the University of Ottawa.

The PASS program is a 40-minute internet-based intervention through which first-year students receive information and tools for effective goal setting and planning, as well as coping strategies. Students complete activities that involve setting their own goals and creating their own study plans. They also learn how to anticipate barriers and stressors while creating "if-then" strategies to deal with these events. The objective of the program is to improve: (a) academic achievement, measured by semester GPA, number of failed courses and marks compared to the group; and (b) retention, measured by semester and yearly retention rates and the number of courses taken and dropped.

The findings of the project, along with the findings of the original evaluation of the PASS program with anglophone students, will be used to develop a strategy for institutionalizing the PASS intervention. If effective at improving the retention of francophone students, PASS could be adapted and efforts could be allocated to implement this program at other French universities and colleges across Canada and abroad.

Methodology and Timeline

The program is being evaluated using randomized control trials beginning in 2015 with 100 students overall. The program is being progressively scaled up over two more cycles, to 300 students in 2016 and 500 students in 2017.

From early September to mid-October, first-year students who self-identify as francophone were invited by email and other advertisement methods to participate in the PASS program. Participants were randomly assigned to participate in the PASS program group or the control group. The random assignment was done using a double-blind method generated automatically by the website hosting the program. The control group — roughly half of the overall group — participated in an unstructured goal-setting exercise. They also wrote about five study strategies learned while browsing the student toolkit available on the Student Academic Success Service (SASS) website. The SASS control was discontinued during the third cycle of the randomized control trial, as it was found to be not sufficiently neutral.

For the first cycle of the project, participants were recruited as part of the Participation in Research program with the department of psychology. For subsequent cycles, the researchers also collaborated with the registrar's office in order to reach larger samples of first-year francophone students on campus. In all cases, the study has been open to all first-year francophone students who are willing to participate in the study.

Participants complete a baseline questionnaire before the intervention to provide the research team with information about variables that are predictors of students' academic success and retention, including sociodemographics, personality, academic goals, school motivation, self-regulatory skills and overall feelings about school. The data collected by the baseline questionnaire is used to evaluate the effectiveness of the PASS intervention for different types of students, in order to examine whether PASS should be offered to all first-year students on campus or whether it should be targeting students who are the most likely to benefit from the intervention.

The impact of the program on students' academic satisfaction is evaluated with five weekly surveys administered after the intervention to assess students' feelings about school and their experience of success and failure in their courses. Administrative data is also being used to examine how the program may improve students' performance on key indicators of academic success, including grades, the number of courses taken, dropped and failed, and retention in their program and at the university. The outcomes are being examined in the short term at the end of students' first semesters, and in the longer term at end of the first, second and third years of students' programs.

Contact Information

For more specific information about this project or for any questions, please contact Helen Tewolde, Senior Researcher and Manager, Centre for Equitable Access at HEQCO (htewolde@heqco.ca); or Patrick Gaudreau, Associate Professor at the University of Ottawa, (patrick.gaudreau@uottawa.ca).