College Choice:
A Survey of English-Speaking
High School Students in Quebec[*]

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Anglophone Quebec students may in their last year of high school choose a college to attend. Chapman's model of choice, which incorporates both student characteristics and external influences—significant others, college characteristics, and college efforts to communicate with students—offers a conceptual framework for detecting patterns in their choices. A sample survey of 422 students found that college reputation and location coupled with student academic average and attitude to high school determined choice. Colleges were caught in the dilemma of trying to achieve the goal of excellence while at the same time maintaining an open admission policy. A network of colleges with different corporate missions would, to some extent, alleviate the dilemma.

La recherche présentée dans cet article visait à préciser comment les élèves anglophones du Québec dans leur dernière année de secondaire choisissent le collège qu'ils veulent fréquenter. Le modèle de choix de Chapman, qui intègre à la fois les caractéristiques des élèves et les influences extérieures—personnes prisées par les élèves, caractéristiques des collèges et efforts des collèges pour communiquer avec les élèves—a servi de cadre conceptuel. Un sondage mené auprès de 422 élèves a révélé que le choix de l'établissement était déterminé par la réputation et l'emplacement du collège ainsi que par la moyenne scolaire de l'élève et son attitude vis-à-vis de l'école secondaire. Les collèges sont aux prises avec un dilemme: essayer d'atteindre leur objectif d'excellence tout en maintenant une politique ouverte d'admission. Un réseau de collèges avec des missions différentes pourrait, dans une certaine mesure, régler ce dilemme.

It is a 20th-century truism in North America that everyone needs a college

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[*] This article was originally submitted for publication in August 1988.

education. Education is a ticket to work, a step on the path to graduate study, a means to athletic prowess, an alternative to a tight labour market, an opportunity for self-development, and a means to a second career. In Quebec, Canada, a Province with historic roots in France and England and in their systems of education, a college education has additional meanings.

In the early 1970s, Quebec had a population of about six million people. Roughly 80% were of French origin while the remainder had an English or ``other' heritage. In the 1980s, a low birth rate among the French, English out-migration to other parts of Canada and steady immigration from around the world has produced a demographic transition. The 1986 census revealed the population of greater Montreal, the hub of Quebec, was 67% French, 15% English and 18% ``other'—a diverse mix of nationalities (Bourbeau, 1986). The Montreal Catholic School Commission, the recipient of most immigrants to Montreal had, in 1981, 89% of its students with French as their mother tongue. By 1986 the number had diminished to 69%, and the projection for the year 2000 was well below 50% (Montreal Catholic School Commission, 1988). By the 21st century, the French flavour of Quebec would be replaced by a much more multiethnic one.

Until the 1960s, there were two main educational systems in the province. The French system was composed of elementary and secondary schools along with private classical colleges, trade and technical schools, nursing schools, and family institutes. Few students graduated from secondary schools; fewer went on to the classical colleges; very few entered university (which required fifteen years of study prior to university entry). The smaller English school system provided an elementary and secondary education of only eleven years prior to university entry. There were no colleges for English students (Magnuson, 1980).

Those in political power in the 1960s, seeking to bring French Quebec into the mainstream of English-speaking North America—while preserving their French heritage—legislated massive changes in the education system. At the post-secondary level, a new college institution was formed in 1967, the *collèges d'enseignement général et professionnel* (CEGEP), to ``encourage secondary school graduates to continue their schooling and [to] . . . eliminate the disparate paths to higher education of French and English students' (Magnuson, 1980, p. 111). French-language CEGEPs were established from former classical colleges and other schools, while English- language CEGEPs had to be created from scratch.

The CEGEPs provided two-year compulsory pre-university programs as well as three-year technical studies leading to employment. Enrolments grew

rapidly, particularly in the university preparatory programs. Between 1962–1963 and 1970–1971 full-time university enrolments, fed by the newly formed CEGEPs' graduates, tripled on the French side and doubled on the English side (Magnuson, 1980, p. 117). Administrators and professors molded their new organizations into vital institutions; colleges developed missions for themselves.

As well, nationalism was on the rise in Quebec. In the mid-1970s, the separatist party came to power and passed language legislation to protect and to preserve French Quebec. Quebeckers whose mother tongue was French as well as non-Canadian immigrants to the Province had to send their children to the French school system (K–11).[1] Until then, most immigrants had entered English-speaking schools. As in former years, parents whose mother tongue was English, and who had an elementary education in English in Canada could send their children to the English school system (the Canada clause). This legislation, the reduced French birth rate, and the influx of migrants made the French school system both smaller and more multi-ethnic, and the English school system simply smaller. Some immigrants had difficulty studying in French, despite introduction of ``welcoming classes.'' By the mid-1980s, there were charges that French teachers diluted their courses so immigrants could keep up and that French students in the same classrooms suffered.

However, entrance to CEGEPs was not decided by mother tongue. Students could elect to attend any CEGEP in the province, provided they met entrance requirements for their chosen program (and that the CEGEP had sufficient space in the program). In fact, some CEGEPs declared as part of their corporate mission that they were ``open'' institutions; they would admit any student to any program—all the student had to do was succeed, once enrolled.

There are no studies of ``college choice'' among senior high school students in Quebec. Given the province's unique educational development, the fact a college education is mandatory prior to university study, and the competition among colleges for a declining pool of students, a study of Quebec students' college choice is worthwhile. I wish, therefore, to determine the basis of college choice for students in their last year of high school in the English school system.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Chapman (1981), in the United States, developed from the literature and his own research a model that postulated salient factors influencing a student's college choice. He found that choice was influenced by:
—*Student characteristics*: parental background; socioeconomic status;

aspiration (both level and type); high school performance;

—*External influences*: significant persons (parents, siblings, friends, high school staff, others); fixed college characteristics (cost/aid, location, program availability, reputation); college effort to communicate with students (written information, campus visit, admissions, recruiting).

Chapman speculated that interaction between a student's personal characteristics and external influences would lead the student to a set of expectations about college life in a particular institution. A student considering a group of institutions would likely develop a preference for one college over others; the student could then make a first choice, a second choice, and so forth.

Chapman's model led to the development of the following research questions to guide the investigation:

RQ1: *What are the factors that influence college choice for students? Are the factors the same for different colleges?*

RQ2: *Do personal characteristics of the student influence college choice?*

METHODOLOGY

Design

A sample survey produced data for analysis of the research questions. The population included secondary school students (grade 11) graduating from English-language high schools in the greater Montreal area (where the vast majority of English-speaking Quebeckers lived) in 1987 June. Of the approximately 8000 students, about 75% or 6000 would enter college. Of the 6000, some were interested in programs available at only one college; these students were excluded from the sample because ``college choice' was not possible for them. The study emphasized public as opposed to private colleges. The vast majority of English college students in Quebec attend four public colleges (referred to as A, B, C and D). The study was funded by one college, and that college was primarily interested in students who might attend their school. This led to a random selection of students from 22 high schools in greater Montreal. English high schools elsewhere in the province were not included in the sample.

A sample of about 400 of the 8000 graduating students would provide data with less than 5% error 95% of the time (Walonick, 1985). The final sample included 422 students.

Interviews to collect all data were conducted in 1987 January. The inter-

viewer would visit a school, meet randomly selected students during the students' free periods, interview them in a quiet setting for about 20 to 25 minutes, and record responses to questions. Respondents were guaranteed anonymity, as was their school. The interviewers were all female and university students.

Instrumentation

An interview guide was developed to tap each aspect of Chapman's model. ``Significant others'' in college choice were assessed on a variant of a measure developed by Riley (1967). Students were asked to mark, on a 5-point scale, the level of influence each potential significant other had upon them.

   The four colleges' reputations were assessed in two ways. First, each college was placed on a 9-point scale ranging from low to high reputation. Second, the respondent's image of each college was established using a projective technique: respondents were asked the first word that came to mind after each college was named (each was named up to four times). Content analysis of responses yielded most frequently stated descriptors of each school.

   The ``Quality of School Life (Revised)'' measure—an 18-item measure that indicates attitude toward school, school work, and teachers (Isherwood & Hammah, 1981)—was used to assess students' attitude to high school.

Data Analysis

The individual interviews were coded, then entered into a data file verified to have less than .01% error. Data was analyzed using the STATPAK program of Walonick Associates (1985).

FINDINGS

The study's findings were organized around the research questions.

RQ1: What are the factors that influence college choice for students?
Are the factors the same for different colleges?

Content analysis of student responses to the question, ``What are the key factors in making `X' your first choice of college?'' (repeated for the second choice) yielded 14 responses. See Table 1 for the leading responses by college.

   Program availability was mentioned in each case, college location or

proximity in seven cases, and college reputation in six cases. Because the ``program'' was available in each college, ``program'' had little to do with ``choice.'' Location and reputation were the two salient factors in college choice.

Most students (n=211) chose college D, because of its reputation. Many (n=151) said colleges A and B were first choice because of ``location'' coupled with ``reputation.'' College C was first choice for the fewest students (n=60). Their choice was based on ``location'' and ``suits me''—a euphemism used by students whose academic average in secondary school was weak.

The factors influencing choice were the same for different colleges in Quebec.

The saliency of ``reputation'' in college choice led me further to explore RQ1. Students rated each college's reputation on a 9-point scale (9 high, 1 low). College D had the highest reputation (mean of 7.1) and was the first choice of most students. College C had the lowest reputation (5.0) and was the first choice of the fewest students. College A (6.3) and College B (5.7) held intermediary reputational ratings. Analysis of variance was used to see if differences in reputation scores were significant.

TABLE 1
The Three Leading Factors in College Choice by College of First Choice

College of First Choice (N=422)							
A	*%*	*B*	*%*	*C*	*%*	*D*	*%*
Location	41	Location	29	Program	45	Reputation	40
Program	24	Reputation	19	Location	18	Program	20
Reputation	13	Program	15	Suits me	10	Location	17
	n=71		*n=80*		*n=60*		*n=211*

College of second choice (N=354)							
A	*%*	*B*	*%*	*C*	*%*	*D*	*%*
Program	21	Reputation	26	2nd choice	28	Location	29
Location	15	Program	17	Program	19	Reputation	21
Reputation	15	``Other"	11	Location	15	Program	17
		2nd choice	11				
	n=34		*n=53*		*n=162*		*n=105*

College D had a significantly higher reputation than College A, College A was significantly higher than College B, and College B was significantly higher than College C (F=86.78, p<.01). Students' responses to the projective measure (for instance, ``Tell me the first word you think of when I mention college A') helped further to explain the meaning of each college's reputation. Each college evoked different images. The following descriptions, developed from students' responses, reveal each college's image.

  Many students thought college A was far away (it was about 35 km from the centre of the location of sample schools), so remote that they had no image of it. Students who knew about college A saw it as a large school with an attractive campus and a good academic reputation—it drew smart students. A few respondents saw college A as ``stuffy and snobby.'

  Most students saw college B as having a good—but average—academic reputation, good programs of study, good atmosphere, and many good

teachers. It appeared a clean and friendly place. Some saw it as a small school, while others viewed it as large. A few students thought it was far away (it was on the periphery of the sampling area, about 7 km from the centre).

Everyone knew about college C: a school attended by low achievers, a school easy to get into. It was a big school with several campuses. Many saw it as a place where neither teachers nor students were serious, and where the climate was bad. For these students, college C was ``second choice,'' a ``last resort.'' By contrast, other students thought it a friendly school with some very good programs and good campuses. Students were divided on the image of college C.

Most students knew about college D: a good school academically, people friendly despite overcrowding. College D was big and convenient to get to (public transportation was available). It had a fine reputation, good teachers and ``hard'' academic standards.

Student rankings of the colleges clearly were based on each institution's envisioned academic reputation or lack thereof.

The question arose of how students learned about each college and their associated reputations. Each student was asked how they learned about the colleges. They were asked to list up to four sources of information and to rate the usefulness of each source. Data was summed by source and degree of usefulness. The prime source of very useful or useful information was pamphlets (74% of 422 students mentioned pamphlets). School counsellors were good sources of information (52%); another source was college representatives (38%) and friends (35%). Teachers (1%), parents and siblings (17%), and relatives (6%) played minor roles in providing information about colleges.

Students were asked the level of influence people had on their choice of college (Table 2). Analysis of variance was used to compare the relative influence of mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, friends, teachers and counsellors. The most influential people were friends (mean 3.27); they were significantly more influential than mothers (3.03), fathers (2.86), and counsellors (2.83), who, in turn, were significantly more influential than teachers (2.41), sisters (1.65), and brothers (1.41) ($F=8.73$, $p<.01$).

The pattern of influence for males was the same as that for the entire sample. However, the pattern altered slightly for female students. For them, friends (3.24) and mothers (3.15) were the most influential, while counsellors (2.92) and fathers (2.89) had less influence.

TABLE 2

People Who Influence College Choice

Level of Influence	*Number of mentions* (N=422)						
	Moth	*Fath*	*Brot*	*Sist*	*Frnd*	*Tchr*	*Coun*
5 Key person	67	64	28	41	57	23	57
4 A lot	105	91	31	43	138	71	95
3 Some	98	99	36	40	127	108	104
2 A little	79	71	34	29	61	75	57
1 No influence	71	85	153	139	39	144	104
0 No response	2	12	140	130	0	1	5
Mean	3.03	2.86	1.41	1.65	3.27	2.41	2.83

Although older siblings were not perceived as influencing the college of first choice, a pattern emerged within families. If an older sibling attended a particular college, then their younger sibling was also likely to attend it: for college A, 77% of the time; college B, 56% of the time; college D, 68% of the time; college C, only 20% of the time.

RQ2: Do personal characteristics of the student influence college choice?

There was no indication the ethnic origin of students' parents was related to college choice. Only 32% of students' fathers and 33% of their mothers were born in Canada. Parents came from Italy (fathers 23%, mothers 21%), Greece (fathers 14%, mothers 14%), other European countries (fathers 10%, mothers 12%), Asia (fathers 7%, mothers 7%), the West Indies (fathers 4%, mothers 4%), and a scattering of other countries. Students in the anglophone school system formed a multi-ethnic community, and it was likely that many of their parents knew little about Quebec CEGEPs.

There was no indication that either the socioeconomic status of parents or aspirations of students influenced college choice. In general, students' parents had modest means. Yet students had nearly significantly higher job aspirations than the current occupations of their fathers (Chi-square=71.4, *p*=.07).

By contrast, high school performance as indicated by students' academic average and attitude to high school *was* related to college of first choice. Students who applied to colleges A, B, and D as first choice had a significantly higher high school academic average than students who applied to College C (AOV, $F=4.41$, $p<.05$). The same pattern was found for students' attitude to high school (AOV, $F=3.91$, $p<.05$).

DISCUSSION

College choice of students in the Quebec English-speaking school system can be understood in terms of the following model, reduced from Chapman's, and assuming that the program a student wants is available. College choice is determined by:

—*Student characteristics:* academic average, attitude to school;
—*External influences:*

Significant people	Primary	Secondary
A. Male students	friends	parents
		counsellors
B. Female students	friends	counsellors
	mother	father

College characteristics (reputation, location)

College efforts to communicate (pamphlets, recruiting visits to high schools by college representatives).

College choice was influenced by student academic average in high school and by student attitude to high school. Better academic students, and those with more positive attitudes to high school sought colleges with higher academic reputations; they selected other colleges as ``second choice' to ensure they would be accepted by at least one college. Students with weaker academic credentials sought entry to colleges ``open' to them.

Male high school graduates were primarily influenced in their choice by their friends in high school and their friends already at college; parents and school counsellors had less influence. Female high school students were primarily influenced by their friends and their mother. Fathers and counsellors had less influence on their choice of college.

College characteristics that influenced choice were reputation and location (given program availability). As well, individual colleges influenced student choice through their pamphlets and visits to high schools by college representatives—visits by college staff members and visits by recent graduates of

high schools.

Not influencing choice in Quebec colleges, yet a part of Chapman's model, were parental background, family socioeconomic status, student job aspirations, teachers, siblings, college campus visits, or the cost of college. The cost factor might best be explained by noting that Quebec supports tuition through general taxation—there are few college costs for students. Of course, entering college meant a student would not likely enter the work force full-time. Attending college meant little or no earned income to the student or the student's family. We cannot tell how many students did not attend college, despite low costs, simply because their earned income was needed at home. The Chapman model remains useful in exploring issues related to college choice.

Students in Quebec English-speaking high schools have roots around the world. As is often the case for recent immigrants to a country, adults have access only to occupations at the lower end of pay and status scales. These immigrants view the education system as a vehicle by which their children may gain a better place in life. Students who do well in Quebec high schools have high job aspirations—far higher that the positions held by their parents. The English-speaking college system in Quebec seems committed to supporting both parental hopes and student aspirations. Some colleges define their ``corporate mission'' as one of high standards and top-quality programs. Other colleges' stated mission is to be ``open''; that is, open to any student to come and try a program—and to succeed or not. Open- admission colleges have difficulty attracting high-calibre students because their reputation is poor.

In an emerging multi-ethnic community, a community that relies on immigration to increase its human resources, colleges must be prepared to serve students linguistically limited, academically weak, or economically disadvantaged, as well as to serve the academically talented. Although not by design, Quebec English CEGEPs, seem to be meeting this challenge.

NOTE

[1]See Quebec's Bill 101 for a detailed statement of the language law in Quebec. Specific requirements for entry to French (Catholic) and English (Protestant) schools are detailed.

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