

## The most effective means of reaching students who require help

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### Summary

This research project was conducted with the collaboration of 267 students from three universities in the province of Quebec. The goal was to identify the marketing mechanisms that effectively reach out to students and can be used to encourage them to ask for help when in need. Based on a list of 25 mechanisms, research revealed students demonstrated a significant preference for the mechanisms ( $p=.01$ ) encouraging them to ask for help rather than reaching out to them. This indicates that the problem is based on lack of motivation to get help rather than on lack of knowledge of help or support available to them. They prefer to be encouraged to get help through email, through a section of the university's website, through the course syllabus or study guide and through messages in the assignment instructions. Over 50 % of respondents stated that it was preferable to use these mechanisms at the beginning of the term. We have noticed that relational mechanisms (one-on-one) were the category least employed. Is this due to a feeling of embarrassment associated with asking for help? Furthermore, despite the fact that technological mechanisms are favored, Web 2.0 and viral marketing was of very little interest to the respondents. A few hypotheses are presented to explain this lack of interest in being reached or encouraged to get help through the use of these second generation technologies.

### Introduction

In order to stimulate perseverance in studies, postsecondary institutions are using more methods to help students who are struggling. Unfortunately, numerous studies demonstrate that these support methods are often poorly understood and are under-used by the target clientele (RHDSC, 2007). We noted that successful students who already possess good learning strategies are more likely to use support services than students who would especially need to get help (Dion, 2006).

Until now, very few studies have focused on mechanisms used to encourage students to ask for help. Thanks to the financing provided by the *Fonds de recherche sur la société et la culture* (FQRSC, 2009-2011), our research team attempted to identify which mechanisms should be used in order to ensure that students are better informed about support methods available to them.

Our results are therefore of great use to institutions that wish to better inform students of help available to them. More specifically, these results allow us to promote the *Système d'Aide Multimédia Interactif à la Persévérance aux études postsecondaires* (S@MI-Persévérance), which is based on our research, an on-line tool offered free of charge to help students persevere and succeed academically.

First we will present the difficulties faced by students at the postsecondary level, then the actions taken to help foster perseverance and success, followed by the mechanisms of marketing used and, finally, the methodology applied exclusively at the university level including a discussion of the results.

### **Difficulties Faced by Students at the Post-Secondary Level**

Many research initiatives (Sauvé et al., 2007; Noeth and Wimberly, 2002; Wagner et al., 2005) conclude that the principle difficulties encountered by newly admitted post-secondary students in distance education or on-campus education programs are linked to personal problems (stress relating to assignments, exams and time-management), deficient learning strategies (self-regulation strategies and cognitive strategies), and weaknesses in prerequisite skills (oral, written and mathematical). These learning difficulties can of course reduce chances of success, but can also lead to abandoning studies. Hypothetically, struggling students who manage to obtain a diploma without correcting these issues will be plagued and limited in the workplace and in society throughout their lives.

Some postsecondary students have permanent learning difficulties stemming from neurological problems (AQETA, 2008). Our research focuses on helping students with learning difficulties. The difficulties are defined by scientific studies on this topic (determining the parameters of the problem, unequivocal identification of the symptoms, tracking options, etc.) and the frequency of cases encountered at the post-secondary level. With that in mind, we have identified dyslexia, dysorthography, dyscalculia and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Adults suffering from these learning disabilities are faced with a significant challenge. According to AQETA (2008), the learning difficulties can cause the student to struggle with reading, writing, spelling, following written instructions, memorizing multiple verbal instructions, formulating thoughts into words, managing money and adopting appropriate social behaviors. The student may experience feelings of anxiety, low self-worth, short attention span, agitation or hyperactivity, weak coordination or spatial disorientation.

According to Newman et al. (2009), 47 % of students who experience learning disabilities access postsecondary studies as opposed to 53 % of the general population. Not only are there fewer students with learning disabilities, 75 % of these students drop out before attaining their diploma.

Wagner et al. (2005) defined three factors that are seen as major barriers to perseverance in postsecondary studies for students with learning disabilities: lack of learning strategies, lack of information for accessing accommodation and services available and a lack of options when it comes to the transition from secondary school to postsecondary programs.

We concluded that struggling students – specifically those who experience learning disabilities - are in need of help. In reality, what do our instructional institutions provide for these students?

### **Actions Taken to Help Foster Perseverance and Success**

Bégin and Ringuette (2005) state that there are certain limitations to steps taken to reduce drop-out and failure in university studies. According to them, activities are numerous and varied, but they represent little overall coordination. Too many players are involved. The splintering of activities and support methods discourages a global and integrated approach and leads to disorganization. Furthermore, the departments in universities take actions that are geared to integrating and having the students adapt to the system rather than adapting to the needs of the student (Dion, 2006).

According to Ofiesh (2007), studies about the tools institutions offer to students with difficulties focus mostly on the nature of the programs that these students follow and on the types of services offered. Sharpe et al. (2005) list, by order of importance, the following educational services: granting additional time, a quiet environment, communication with the teacher, assistance from a tutor or another type of assistant, recordings of texts to be read, recordings of the professor's lecture, a note-taker, an adequate location for listening and reading a task out loud. Support technologies most used are numerizers, talking books, digital and portable note-taking devices, reading help software, specialized recording devices, voice recognition software, an advanced mouse system, adapted workstations, and word prediction software (Ofiesh and Hughes, 2002; Sharpe et al., 2005; Statistics Canada, 2009; King et al. 2010). The results of these studies show that services and support technologies help students with learning disabilities to work with written and oral content. These technologies also facilitate comprehension. Lemire Auclair (2006) groups intervention methods used to aide students into two categories: (1) re-education through the adoption of strategies for effective compensation, (2) accommodation, which places support technologies and help tools at the disposition of learners. These methods seem efficient since students who adopted these technologies in their first semester in a post-secondary institution obtained exam results comparable to students without learning disabilities (King et al., 2010).

Yet, before being able to offer help to these students in need, Riopel and Maisonneuve (2006) reiterate the need for early diagnosis for students who

are struggling in order to be able to identify the principle difficulties that they encounter and to offer them the appropriate support.

### **Marketing Mechanisms Used**

Whether they are for students who are struggling or students with learning disabilities, marketing mechanisms used at the post-secondary level do not seem to ensure that goals set by institutions are met. A survey by the RHDSC (2007) demonstrates that only a small percentage of those students conscious of their lack of fundamental aptitudes to study used the institutional services available. This survey mentions that one out of five students with a learning disability does not know who to turn to when there is a problem or how to succeed in his/her courses. Caron (2006) concludes that more and more students with diagnosed learning disabilities seem to be exhausted by the number of councilors to meet. These students admit their difficulties but are lost when it comes to choosing support methods. These results bring to light the fact that students do not necessarily know the support methods available to them, or if they do know, they are not motivated to access them. This may be due to the perceived threat to their self-esteem of recognizing a need for help and the process involved in expressing this need to another party (Karabenick, 2011) or it could be due to any number of other motivational variables. Given that it is primarily the most successful of university students who access the support methods available, Dion (2006), Karabenick and Newman (2006) and Neyts et al. (2006) reiterate the importance of examining the process by which students are encouraged to access support methods so that all in need may benefit.

All in all, we conclude that there are many lacunas in the actions taken to help students. These relate to the help tools offered or the mechanisms used to encourage the students to ask for help. Our study focuses on the second: marketing mechanisms.

### **Methodology**

The objective of this exploratory study is to establish to what extent the marketing mechanisms put in place by postsecondary institutions encourage students to get the help they need. Our sub-objectives are to: (1) define the technological marketing mechanisms, either in print or relational, in use by institutions, (2) evaluate the weight of each mechanism to encourage students to ask for help and (3) evaluate to what extent struggling students accessed the support services offered.

The variable 'asking for help', according to Ryan and Pintrich (1997), is based in the socio-interactional process which consists of (1) a metacognitive

element (recognition by the student that he/she needs help), (2) a motivational element (the decision to get help) and, lastly, (3) a socio-behavioural element (the strategy used to ask another person). We believe that an efficient institutional strategy for encouragement should foresee the adoption of varied marketing mechanisms and that the content of these mechanisms should target each of these three elements of the 'asking for help' process. These elements lead to self-regulation (Nadler, 1998; Karabenick, 1998, 2003, 2010; Nader-Grosbois, 2007; Mercier and Frederiksen, 2008; Puustinen and Rouet, 2009; Wood, 2009; Chyung et al., 2010; Wolters, 2010; Mäkitalo-Siegl and Fischer, 2011).

## **Participants**

Twelve representatives from five institutions (the Télé-université, the University of Quebec in Abitibi-Témiscamingue, the University of Sherbrooke, Sherbrooke Cégep and the College Lionel-Groulx) were contacted in order to conduct an inventory of the marketing mechanisms that they employ.

## **Measurement Tools**

In order to prepare a list of mechanisms used by the instructional institutions, we administered a semi-structured interview with the person in charge of services linked to student success at a few colleges and universities. A literature review on the subject allowed us to complete this list.

The identification of marketing mechanisms used in the postsecondary institutions lead to an evaluative questionnaire. This questionnaire, administered to university students, is comprised of three sections: identification of the respondent, evaluation of the marketing mechanisms as well as access to support services in relation to the level of difficulty encountered. The section on the identification of the respondent pertained to age, name of university and the level of progress in university studies. The section on the evaluation of the marketing mechanisms pertained to: (1) the effectiveness of reaching struggling students (yes or no), (2) the effectiveness of encouraging students to ask for help (very effective, effective, not very effective, not effective) and (3) the desired frequency of use for each of these mechanisms in order to maximize efficiency. The last section of the questionnaire aims to learn the frequency of difficulties faced by students during the course of their studies (never, sometimes, often, very often), if they accessed support services in their instructional institution and if they have ever been diagnosed with a learning disability.

The distribution of the questionnaire, in various formats (institutional newspaper, student newspaper, email, institution website, in-class

completion, etc.) was done by each researcher within his/her own participating institution.

## Results and Discussion

The experiment was conducted from April to August of 2010. Respondents to the questionnaire 'Evaluation of Marketing Mechanisms' were 36 years old on average. The most frequent level of progress in university studies of respondents was the 7<sup>th</sup> semester or higher. This represented 37 % of the students. The students were experienced. The table 1 presents the 25 marketing mechanisms and their evaluation by students concerning the effectiveness at reaching out to them (percentage of the number of students who responded by selecting effective and very effective) and the effectiveness of encouraging them to ask for help (percentage of students who answered yes).

**Table 1** *Effectiveness of marketing mechanisms to reach students and to encourage them to ask for help*

<b>Marketing Mechanism</b>	<b>Reaching Students (Effective + Very Effective)</b>	<b>Encouraging Asking for Help</b>
<b>Technological Support</b>		
Group email	<b>67 %</b>	<b>93 %</b>
Institution website	<b>52 %</b>	<b>90 %</b>
Website of the student association	48 %	65 %
Computerized questionnaire (self and help-seeking)	45 %	77 %
Personalized email	37 %	53 %
Viral marketing	25 %	30 %
Web 2.0 (texts, Facebook, Twitter)	22 %	20 %
<b>Average Spread-type</b>	<b><math>\mu = 42 \%</math>   <math>\sigma = 15,7</math></b>	<b>61 %   <math>\sigma = 28,3</math></b>
<b>Print Support</b>		
Posters	<b>54 %</b>	65 %
Student Newspaper	<b>53 %</b>	58 %
Message in the course outline or syllabus	51 %	<b>84 %</b>
Entry in the agenda	49 %	63 %
Message in the assignment instructions	47 %	<b>81 %</b>
Promotional pamphlet	43 %	49 %
Informational letters	37 %	51 %
Publicity in bars or cafés	29 %	28 %

Messages on car windshields	12 %	7 %
Institution newspaper	42 %	53 %
<b>Average Spread-type</b>	<b><math>\mu = 42 \% \quad \sigma = 13</math></b>	<b><math>\mu = 54 \% \quad \sigma = 23</math></b>
<b>Relational Support (Human Resources)</b>		
Academic difficulties theme day	41 %	49 %
Kiosques	41 %	55 %
Word of mouth (student to student)	40 %	56 %
Group or individual meetings	39 %	66 %
Timely thematic workshops	37 %	53 %
Student engagement contract – avoiding academic exclusion	36 %	52 %
Credited courses on academic difficulties	35 %	54 %
In-class presentations	29 %	40 %
<b>Average Spread-type</b>	<b><math>\mu = 37 \% \quad \sigma = 4</math></b>	<b><math>\mu = 53 \% \quad \sigma = 7,3</math></b>
<b>Total Results</b>		
<b>Average Spread-type</b>	<b><math>\mu = 40 \% \quad \sigma = 11,6</math></b>	<b><math>\mu = 56 \% \quad \sigma = 20,7</math></b>

The students' four favorite marketing mechanisms in terms of effectiveness in reaching out to them and effectiveness in terms of encouraging them to ask for help are presented in the table 2.

**Table 2** *Students' Favorite Marketing Mechanisms*

<b>Effectiveness in reaching students</b>	<b>Effectiveness in encouraging students to ask for help</b>
1. Group email	1. Group email
2. Posters	2. Institution website
3. Institution website	3. Message in the course outline or syllabus
4. Student newspaper	4. Messages in the assignment instructions

Based on this classification, we can conclude that email and the institution's website are the two favored options in terms of the effectiveness at reaching out to students as well as encouraging them to ask for help. Posters and Student newspaper, effective for reaching students, are replaced by messages contained in the course outline, the study guide and the instructions provided in the assignment used to encourage students to ask for help.

We can also subdivide the mechanisms prioritized by students into two categories: the mechanisms of basic information and the mechanisms of recall. It may be surprising to find that the basic course material and the

assignment instructions are not among the methods deemed most effective in reaching students to convey which support mechanisms are at the disposal. This might explain why it is in the moment when a learning difficulty is encountered that the recall of the existence of marketing mechanisms is most effective.

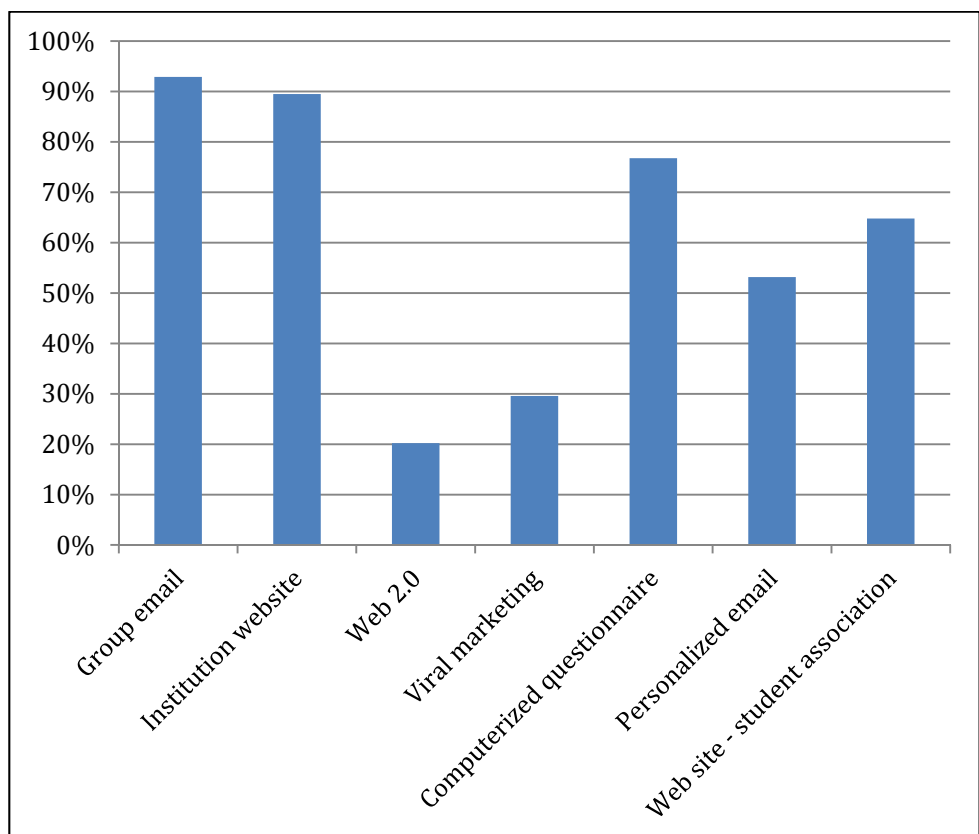
Furthermore, we conclude that no mechanism in the category of “relational support” is favored in terms of either the effectiveness of reaching out to students or encouraging them to ask for help. Preference levels for mechanisms in this category are the lowest of the three categories ( $\mu = 37\%$  and  $53\%$  respectively). However, the pedagogical material provided by the professor, someone who has a privileged link to the student, is appreciated for encouraging a student to ask for help. Yet these mechanisms remain impersonal. This conclusion leads us to believe that the credibility of the source has an influence on the request for help but also that there is an avoidance behavior present when it comes to one-on-one relations. What would it be about these relations that make students avoid requesting help? Additional studies must be done to identify and validate these explanatory hypotheses.

The choices for answering questions on the effectiveness of encouraging asking for help fall into 2 categories: effective and non-effective. This allowed us to compare the differences in the average with the dichotomous choice for the effectiveness of reaching students. We can therefore state that the effectiveness of encouraging asking for help is superior to ( $\mu = 56\%$ ) the effectiveness of reaching out to students ( $\mu = 40\%$ ). This proportional difference is statistically significant ( $p > ,01$ ). This observation corroborates a study done by Caron (2006) that discusses the problem of motivation to ask for help rather than a lack of knowledge about available services. Also, this observation corresponds with a study by Karabenick (2011) that discusses a sense of demotivation when it comes to asking for help due to a perceived threat to self-esteem. This threat to self-esteem may well be the reason relational support options are less frequently chosen.

We have also observed that Web 2.0 and viral marketing finished second last in terms of effectiveness of reaching out to students and in terms of effectively encouraging them to ask for help. This is displayed in the figure 1.



**Figure 1** *Effectiveness of technological methods for encouraging asking for help*



When examining all the marketing mechanisms evaluated, only the messages left on car windshields ranked lower in success than the Web 2.0 and viral marketing methods. The question we must ask is the following: Why is it that digital-age students do not favor avant-garde technological mechanisms to encourage them to ask for help? It seems possible that students are unfamiliar with these means of communication regardless of their use of this technology, which explains their low favorability. Could we also assume that students would actually rather avoid academic interventions in a realm that they consider part of their private life and use primarily for leisure and entertainment? We believe it would be important to investigate this issue further.

Considering each of the four preferred mechanisms used to encourage asking for help, respondents stated in a proportion of over 50 % that it is best to use these mechanisms in the beginning of the semester. One third of the respondents stated that they might be encouraged to ask for help after receiving an informative email at a critical moment such as mid-semester or near the end of the semester. These are times when more assignments are due and more exams are being conducted.

We also observed that 65.9 % of students who affirmed that they had learning difficulties (often and very often) throughout their postsecondary educational experience never turned to support services available through their postsecondary institution. Furthermore, of those who did turn to support services for help, over half (57.4 %) state that they never or seldom experience learning difficulties. These statistics corroborate with a study conducted by Dion (2006), which states that more often than not it is the students who are least in need of help who take advantage of these services. These students may have higher levels of self-regulation and may perceive less of a threat to their self-esteem for making use of these support devices.

Among students who were diagnosed as; 1) having a learning disability and 2) often or very often having difficulties, 20 % never accessed an academic help centre in their institution of study. This confirms the results of the study conducted by RHDSC (2007), which reports the same percentage. Furthermore, of those students who: 1) were never diagnosed with a learning disability and 2) often or very often experience difficulties, 60 % have never consulted an academic help centre. Do these students who are experiencing difficulties lack information about what support services are available to them or do they lack the motivation to get help? Given the conclusive results obtained according to the variable 'to get help', we believe that the problem is based on lack of motivation to get available help rather than a lack of information about these services.

## **Conclusion**

Many studies observed that students who are really struggling in their postsecondary studies do not turn to the help services available in their institutions. We asked students to identify their preferred marketing mechanisms used by postsecondary institutions to encourage them to get help to overcome the difficulties encountered during their studies.

A list of 25 marketing mechanisms was created based on a questionnaire submitted to 12 representatives from five instructional institutions. The evaluation of 25 marketing mechanisms by the 267 students from three Quebec universities reveals that these students prefer to be encouraged to ask for help, especially in the beginning of the semester, through group emails, the university website, messages in the course syllabus or outline and messages incorporated in the assignment instructions. However, in terms of effectiveness in reaching out to students, posters and the student newspaper win out as the last two mechanisms. Also, one third of respondents stated that it would be effective to send out an informational email just before the assignment due date and right before exams are held.

We noticed that technological mechanisms encourage students to ask for help. However, Web 2.0 and viral marketing basically ranked last. It is

important to ask why these two marketing mechanisms are so unpopular with students. Did a lack of knowledge of proper terms bias the results, or was there a real desire to ensure that the institutions had no recourse? A better understanding of the reasons behind the rejection of these support methods might allow us to find a way to better use these available tools effectively as they have a great capacity to reach students. Further research could shed light on this issue.

The majority of students (60 %) who affirm that they have serious learning difficulties have never accessed the available support services in their instructional institutions. We believe it is mainly based on a lack of motivation to get help rather than a lack of knowledge about the help available to them. It would seem essential to convey messages that encourage self-regulatory abilities in order for support services to reach the intended clientele. These measures will help students to persevere, succeed and become well-qualified professionals prepared to face the challenges of a society in constant evolution.

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