# What Are the Difficulties Encountered by Older College Student Populations?

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This article features results from a research project aimed at understanding how the different characteristics, realities and experiences of adult students influence their educational pathway at the college level.

## Background

### Adult student populations: growing yet often ignored numbers

The adult student population in postsecondary education has grown rapidly in recent decades (Caruth, 2014), particularly in Canada (Panacci, 2017). Nevertheless, it still receives little interest from the research and education communities (Robertson, 2020). In the province of Québec, where entry into higher education mainly occurs at the college level, this population represents between 8% and 10% of the student body in colleges (Richard & al., 2023). In terms of academic success, the graduation rate of adult college students is lower than that of their younger peers (Richard, 2018).

It is essential to consider, first, that Québec's needs in terms of skilled labour are increasingly important and, second, that the development of skills adapted to the requirements of the labour market is increasingly carried out in a lifelong learning logic. Hence, concrete actions contributing to skills enhancement and requalification are necessary in order to allow both young and old students to obtain post–secondary diplomas that meet job market requirements and their desires for professional development.

It is in this context that it seems relevant to better understand the difficulties experienced by adult college students in order to foster success and perseverance during studies.
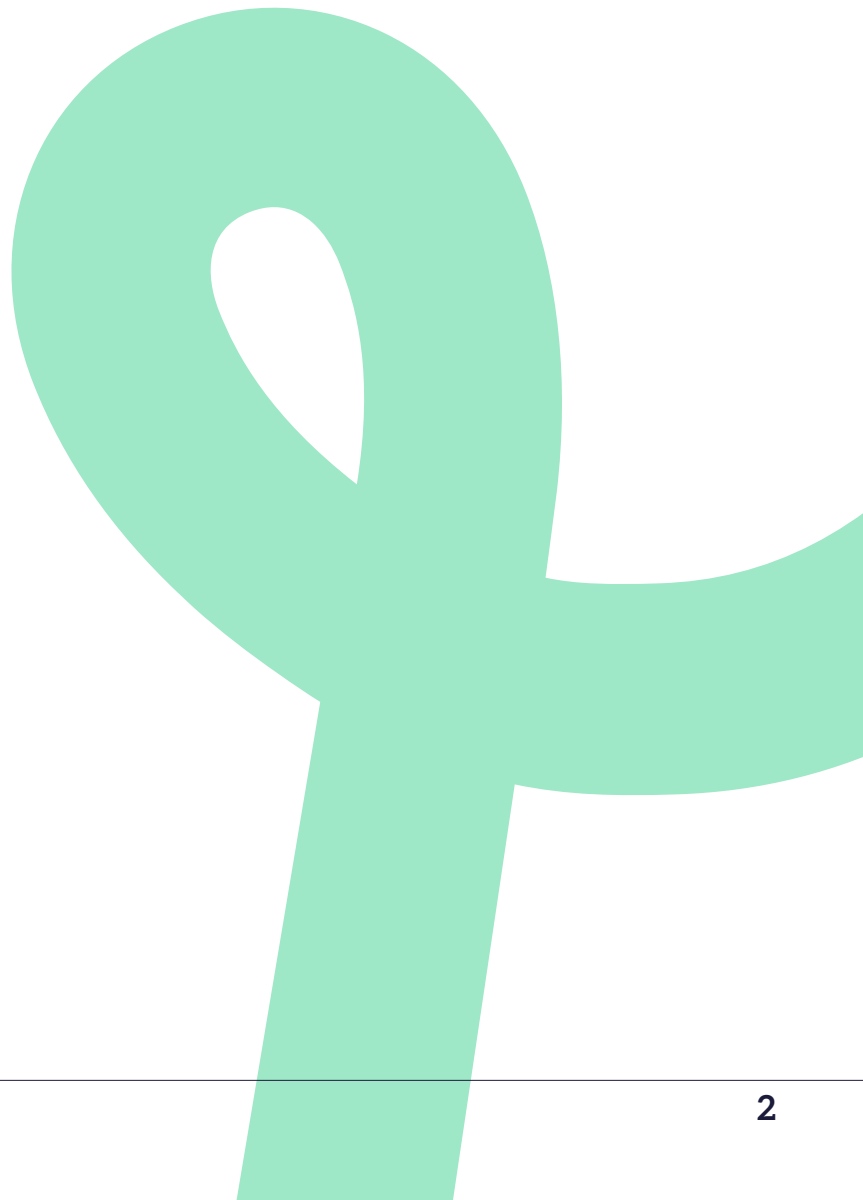
# Key Concept

## Better understand the types of difficulties faced by adult students using the Cross model

The Cross model (1974) is widely used to analyze the difficulties faced by adults in postsecondary education. It is structured around three types of barriers: situational, dispositional and institutional. These barriers are problems often identified by researchers in describing the realities of adults in higher education (Fairchild, 2003).

Table 1.
**Typology of Barriers Experienced by Adult Student Populations**

**Situational Barriers**

Linked to the social environment and represent the coordination of circumstances with which adults must deal on a daily basis, and which lead to organizational conflicts related to studies:

• Family circumstances (marital status, dependents)

• Professional circumstances (paid employment)

• Extracurricular circumstances

**Dispositional Barriers**

These barriers refer to an adult's attributes, beliefs and abilities:

• Difficulties adapting to college

• Concerns about relations with younger student populations

• Feelings of academic incompetence

• Self-perception as a learner

• Learning styles

• Ability to learn

• etc. .

**Institutional Barriers**

They refer to the structural aspects of college institutions that can hinder adults:

• Faculty or departmental requirements

• Class schedules

• Mandatory attendance

• Service hours

• College policies

• Support measures

• Administrative processes

• etc.

*Note.* Adapted from Cross, K. *Lowering the barriers for adult learners.* The Liberal Arts College and the Experienced Learner, 2–13.

# Methodology

## A longitudinal survey to follow the experience of college students

**Type of research:** Longitudinal quantitative

**Study population:** 1,015 college students aged 24 and over

**Place and period of research:** 25 CEGEPs and private colleges, for 5 semesters, from the fall semester of 2020 to the fall semester of 2022

Participants were asked to complete one questionnaire per semester for a total of five questionnaires. From the second semester onwards, they were asked to give their opinion on the difficulties experienced during their studies on the basis of 23 pre-established choices of situational, dispositional and institutional difficulties. For the analysis, these difficulties were linked to three characteristics: 1) gender (female, male), 2) parental status (with children, no children) and 3) paid employment (working while studying, not having a job).

# Results

## Life situations that make the academic journey more challenging

**1** **Situational difficulties (i.e., the articulation of different responsibilities) are the most important type of difficulties.**

It is mainly situational difficulties that are more widely identified by adult students. The balancing of their various extracurricular responsibilities, particularly family, work, and financial obligations, seems to cause the most difficulties. Respondents feel that they lack time for school, work (which leads to financial problems) and family (less involvement with their children and life partner). The reorganization of one's lifestyle causes increased stress, sleep problems and poorer eating habits.

The following table shows in more detail that situational difficulties are the type of difficulties more widely identified by respondents:

## Table 2.
## Percentage of Difficulties Identified by Students Surveyed

- 🟢 Situation obstacles
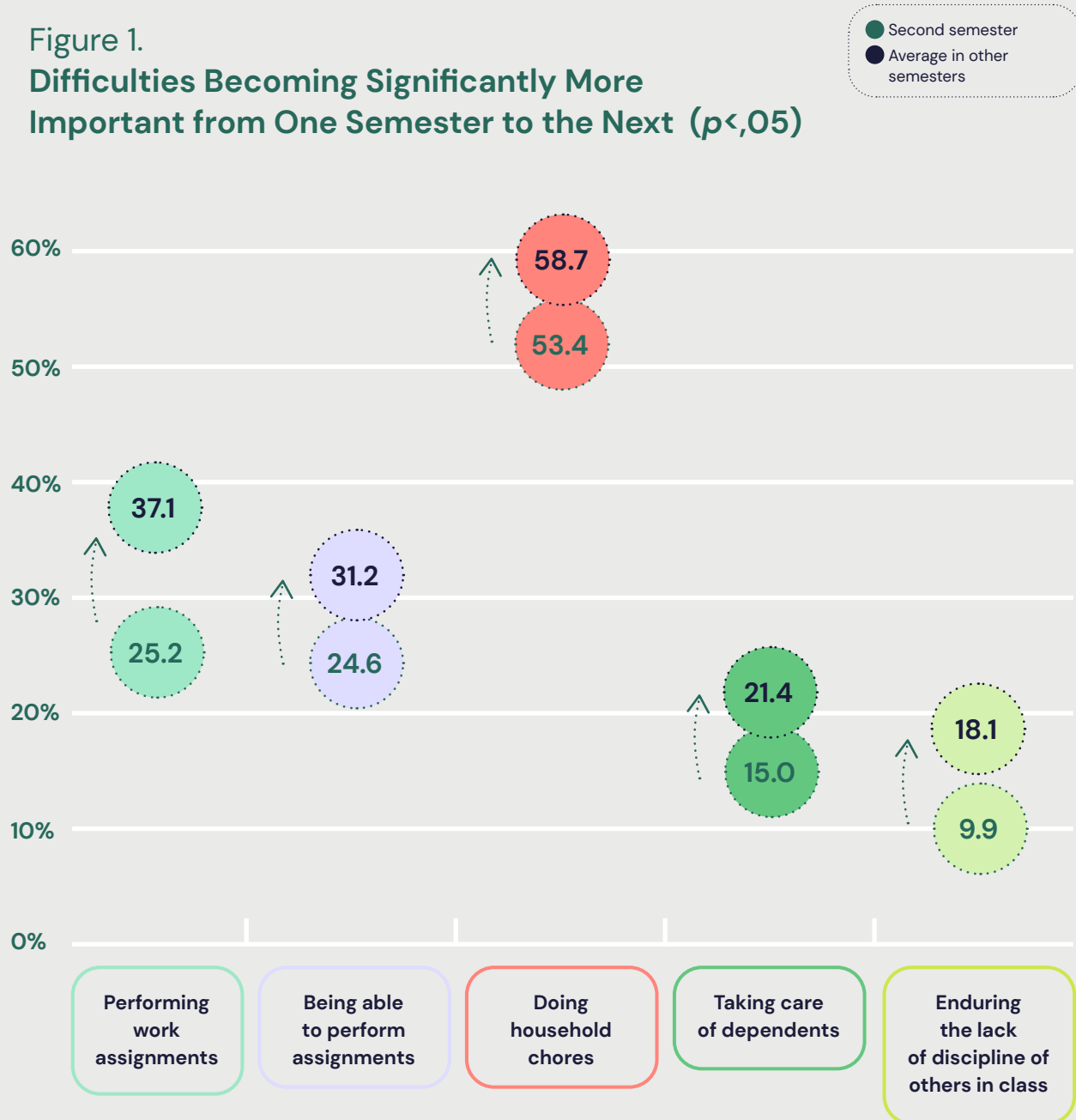- 🟣 Dispositional obstacles
- 🟩 Institutional obstacles

| | Second Semester % | Average in Subsequent Semesters % |
|---|---|---|
| MAINTAINING A HEALTHY LIFESTYLE | 66.8 | 65.4 |
| FINDING TIME TO REST | 65.9 | 60.2 |
| MANAGING MY STRESS | 58.5 | 49.6 |
| MAINTAINING A SOCIAL LIFE | 56.5 | 54.6 |
| DOING HOUSEHOLD CHORES | 53.4 | 58.7 |
| MANAGING MY TIME | 49.9 | 47.5 |
| BALANCING STUDIES AND PAID WORK | 46.5 | 38.8 |
| FINDING TIME FOR OUT-OF-CLASS ASSIGNMENTS | 43.7 | 43.6 |
| BALANCING STUDIES AND PARENTAL OBLIGATIONS | 35.4 | 30.1 |
| DEVELOPING RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER STUDENTS | 33.1 | 24.0 |
| PREPARING FOR ASSESSMENTS | 31.8 | 34.8 |
| REMEMBERING INFORMATION (MEMORY PROBLEMS) | 25.8 | 26.2 |
| PERFORMING WORK ASSIGNMENTS WITH OTHER STUDENTS | 25.2 | 37.1 |
| BEING ABLE TO COMPLETE ASSIGNMENTS | 24.6 | 31.2 |
| UNDERSTANDING THE SUBJECT | 18.7 | 11.0 |
| INVESTING IN MY STUDIES IN LINE WITH PROGRAM REQUIREMENTS | 17.4 | 22.8 |
| TAKING CARE OF DEPENDENTS | 15.0 | 21.4 |
| TAKING NOTES DURING CLASS | 14.4 | 13.2 |
| ADAPTING TECHNOLOGICALLY | 14.4 | 7.9 |
| ADAPTING TO TEACHER REQUIREMENTS | 11.7 | 13.9 |
| ENDURING LACK OF DISCIPLINE IN CLASS | 9.9 | 18.1 |
| FAMILIARIZING MYSELF WITH THE REQUIREMENTS OF MY PROGRAM | 8.3 | 7.6 |
| FAMILIARIZING MYSELF WITH COLLEGE RULES | 2.2 | 1.9 |

## 2 Some difficulties increase and intersect during one's educational pathway.

Some difficulties become significantly more important from one semester to the next.

Figure 1.
**Difficulties Becoming Significantly More Important from One Semester to the Next** (*p*<,05)

Legend:
- Second semester
- Average in other semesters



Categories (x-axis):
- Performing work assignments — 37.1 / 25.2
- Being able to perform assignments — 31.2 / 24.6
- Doing household chores — 58.7 / 53.4
- Taking care of dependents — 21.4 / 15.0
- Enduring the lack of discipline of others in class — 18.1 / 9.9

Carrying out team assignments mainly refers to the organizational aspect of managing different assignments with other students; while the ability to carry out assignments relates to the skills and competencies of the adult student. This difficulty can also be considered from a situational perspective, as it may be attributed to a lack of time. Doing household chores and caring for dependents, especially children, are also situational difficulties and refer to the articulation of family obligations and studies. Enduring a lack of discipline in the classroom echoes adults' relationships with their younger peers. Adult college students sometimes perceive their younger peers negatively. In particular, they fault them for a lack of assiduity in their school work, a low level of maturity, and insist on the difficulties associated with carrying out team assignments.

### 3 Women and student parents identify more difficulties.

Among the profiles of the adult students surveyed, two identified more difficulties: women and student parents. First, female students reported encountering in a higher proportion the following difficulties: maintaining healthy lifestyle habits, finding time to rest, managing stress, doing household chores, finding time to do work outside the classroom, balancing studies and parental obligations, preparing for assessments and investing in one's studies according to program requirements. As for student parents, the following difficulties were identified: balancing studies and parental obligations, doing household chores, taking care of dependents, finding time to rest and finding time to do work outside the classroom.

# What Can we Learn from our Results?

## For a better understanding of the difficulties experienced and the profiles of adult students

**1** **LThe difficulties experienced intersect and should not be considered individually.**

While situational difficulties were most frequently identified by adult college students, to a lesser extent, dispositional and institutional difficulties were also present.

These difficulties should not be addressed individually and resulting barriers should not be seen in silos, as the boundaries between these difficulties are usually tenuous and porous. For example, a situational difficulty related to the coordination of parenting obligations, studies and paid work may be exacerbated by institutional rules (Keith, 2007) of a curriculum imposing the requirement to attend physically or to participate in certain activities or team assignments. Therefore, barriers intersect and potentiate each other to shape the difficulties encountered by adult students.

**2** **Student profiles that are marked by heterogeneous characteristics.**

The profiles of adults studying at the college level are heterogeneous, forming not "one" but "many" adult student populations. While gender, parenthood and job tenure were the characteristics analyzed in our research, other characteristics could also enrich the profiles identified, such as high school GPA, disability, educational background, age group, place of birth, retention/dropout status and socioeconomic status. In order to foster retention and success among adult college students, a host of characteristics must be taken into account for a better understanding of the difficulties experienced.

# Courses of Action

In order to take into account the organizational challenges of adult student populations and the heterogeneity of their profiles as well as to adapt the college education system to their reality, a few actions can be implemented by higher education institutions and the staff working with these student populations:

- ✓ Be flexible and open to the realities of adult student populations.

  - Since adult students go through a college experience that is different from that of the student population as a whole, it is necessary that all stakeholders in the college network be more aware of the issues and difficulties experienced by adult student populations and that equitable accommodation measures that ensure the same opportunities for retention and success can be offered as needed.

- ✓ Develop support services and adapt institutional policies to the realities of all adult student populations, not just those of student parents.

- ✓ Reflect on and adapt pedagogical practices and institutional rules according to their impact on adult student populations: team assignments, absence management, cost of required materials, recognition of prior learning, personalization of pathways and promotion of services.

- ✓ Update and enhance financial support (mainly Student Financial Assistance) without compromising the current situation and financial future of adult student populations.

  - A return to school, by choice or obligation, should not jeopardize a student's financial situation by forcing them to take on significant debt or squander all of their savings. Society wins when young and old students choose education that leads to qualifications. The collective responsibility toward them is to provide them with an adapted financial situation that is favourable to the continuation of their studies until graduation.

# Lines of Research

🔍 Document the influence of contextual elements surrounding a return to school project, such as the previous academic journey and the support of life partners or other significant persons along the college journey of adult student populations.

🔍 Study in more detail, through qualitative approaches, the challenges faced by different adult student profiles, including student parents, single mothers and students from recent immigrant backgrounds (international students or permanent residents) (Lin, 2016; Robertson, 2020; Doutreloux, 2023).

🔍 Identify how the different situational, dispositional and institutional barriers potentiate each other and how they can influence the decisions of adult students to drop out of school.

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# Biographical Note

**Éric Richard** is a Professor of Sociology at the Cégep du Vieux Montréal, a researcher affiliated with the Centre d'Étude des COnditions de vie et des BESoins de la population (ÉCOBES) and a regular member of the Observatoire Jeunes et Société. He has been teaching sociology in the college network since 2001 and has been conducting research at this level since 2005. In addition to his interests in pedagogy, his work focuses on students enrolled in the Police Techniques program, the intraprovincial mobility of CEGEP students, the adult student population, LGBTQ+ realities and issues related to student food security. His research interests mainly concern "youth" and encompass issues such as mobility, integration, training and living conditions.