



# The Power of Feedback

*Early identification of students improves retention rates*

# Overview

According to Colleges Ontario, one of the most important challenges facing colleges today is helping students successfully complete their postsecondary education. Some learners switch programs, institutions, or abandon their studies completely for a variety of reasons. In fact, just over one quarter of all those who start a college program in Ontario leave that program without graduating or switch to another program.<sup>2</sup>

La Cité, a French-language college of applied arts and technology located in Ottawa, has embarked on an ambitious multi-year program to improve student retention through the earlier identification of students at risk. Ninety percent of La Cité teacher-student interactions continue to happen face-to-face, so the program—built around the Brightspace platform—puts the emphasis on instructor observation within the classroom and qualitative feedback provided to students through Brightspace. The approach is not only proving to identify at risk students sooner—it is creating a cultural shift within La Cité’s faculty ranks, with instructor focus moving away from just teaching “material” to teaching “students.”

## AT A GLANCE

<b>Client</b>	La Cité, a French-language college of arts and technology
<b>Students</b>	5,000+
<b>Level</b>	Postsecondary
<b>Solutions</b>	Brightspace Online and Blended Learning solution

## CHALLENGE

- Flat enrollment rates coupled with student attrition
- Off-the-shelf early warning system and manual methods failing to flag students at risk
- Low adoption (50%) of previous learning management system
- Inefficient and ineffective management of student progress

## SOLUTION

- Custom-developed ‘Savoir’ student success platform enabled through the Brightspace platform and Brightspace Valence extensibility technology

## RESULT<sup>1</sup>

- 60% improvement in faculty adoption of learning platform
- Earlier identification of students at risk (from 8 weeks to 3 weeks)
- Reduced administrative burden by decreasing student status meetings from three hours to thirty minutes
- Heightened awareness of progress for students via real-time, individualized report cards

 Challenge

### **STUDENT RETENTION IN A COMPETITIVE EDUCATION CLIMATE**

While student retention is an ongoing issue for many colleges and universities, the problem is more acute for La Cité, the only fully French-speaking College in Ottawa. “With funding for college institutions tied to graduation rates, student retention is a top of mind issue for any college. But it is even more of an issue for us, in a city where nearly one third of the population speaks both official languages,” explains Michel Singh, Senior Advisor, Technology Integration at La Cité. “While most of our students speak French as their first language, they are also bilingual. Therefore, an English school is as equally attractive to them as a French school. If we also factor in globalization, and look at students coming from immigrant families, English is more attractive than French. We see it in our enrollment numbers. It is tough for us to grow in contrast to other institutions in Ottawa such as St. Lawrence or Algonquin College.”

Seeking to address the problem of student attrition, La Cité had previously invested in an off-the-shelf early warning system to help identify at risk students. The project failed miserably. “The system was very awkward to use, and didn’t provide us with the ongoing monitoring we needed. Faculty were only required to go into the system a couple of times a year and it was simply not enough,” says Singh.

### **MANUAL METHODS FAIL TO YIELD RESULTS**

La Cité also tried manual methods to identify students at risk. “Student services would meet with faculty twice—once at mid-term and then again at the end of term for a complete progress review. They would go through every student, looking at grades, attendance, and gathering teacher feedback. It was a long drawn out meeting—up to three hours, and again, didn’t really give us that early warning system we really needed to identify students at risk. By that meeting at mid-term, we were often too late to intervene,” says Singh.

### **LUKEWARM FACULTY ADOPTION OF EXISTING LMS**

Further adding to its challenges, La Cité also struggled for years with faculty adoption of its previous learning management system (LMS). After nearly eight years of use, the adoption rate still hovered around 50%.<sup>3</sup> “We were always playing around with the system trying to figure out how to boost our adoption rate, but at the time, use of the system was not a requirement, and faculty just didn’t see the value in the tool,” says Singh.

Frustrated by the LMS’ mediocre adoption rate, and at the same time pressured by the solution’s vendor to upgrade to an entirely new system, La Cité embarked on a search for a new learning platform that would offer a good product, good implementation and drive up adoption numbers. “Our previous vendor sent us back to the drawing board,” says Singh. “We were already unhappy with our weak adoption rate, and were essentially looking at a brand new implementation, so it was simply a given that we begin testing and looking at different options.”



# Solution

## **A STRONG FRONT-RUNNER OUT OF THE GATE**

In La Cité's evaluation of new learning management systems, the Brightspace platform emerged as a promising candidate. In addition to the solution having the robust functionality La Cité was seeking, the D2L team also demonstrated a willingness to partner with the educational institution and tailor the solution specifically to fit La Cité's needs. "Brightspace was already the premium solution by far, but in practice, it has far exceeded our expectations," says Singh. "It was also the right timing within the institution. Brightspace was relevant, fit within our vision at the college, and we had the team in place internally to see the implementation through to a successful conclusion."

After a vendor assessment period that started in the spring, a decision was made to select Brightspace coupled with an aggressive goal to be fully implemented in just a few months—in time for the start of school in September. Together, the La Cité and D2L teams worked to successfully meet the aggressive deadline.

## **IDENTIFY AT RISK STUDENTS**

As a key part of the Brightspace implementation, La Cité custom-developed a system called 'Savoir' (the French term for 'knowledge') using Brightspace Valence, D2L's extensibility technology. Valence provides all the APIs, client libraries and tools developers need to create value on top of the Brightspace platform.

Savoir is a student success system that gathers qualitative insights from faculty captured through an instructor's face-to-face interactions and observations in the classroom. Savoir then couples this information with data from the student's interactions with learning material to quickly identify students at risk. As early as week three in a term, and then again at week six, faculty provide feedback to students via the Gradebook tool using familiar red, green, and yellow status indicators. Feedback is based on qualitative observations by faculty members and can be captured much earlier than more traditional quantitative quiz-based insights.

"One of the big takeaways for us from the Brightspace/Savoir implementation was the vital importance of feedback to the learning experience," says Singh. "We absolutely learned through this process that if we want to identify students at risk, the best people to provide subjective information about student engagement are the teachers who are in front of them in the classroom. It's more than just test scores."

Another positive side effect has been the faculty's reaction to this emphasis on feedback. "We were able to demonstrate to our teachers that we will not just drive our business decisions based on demographics and numbers, but also on the faculty's professional judgment. In this era of big data and technology, faculty members are often leery of administration and tools. This sent them a strong message that their feedback was important and valued and it was very well received."



“One of the greatest strengths of the intervention model that is being implemented at La Cité is that it combines lagging and historical data from the student’s past experiences in high school (for example, grades in math), perceptual data about the student (for example, the individual’s confidence in being successful in college), and other characteristics that have been shown to correlate negatively with student success (for example, mother tongue other than the language taught at school), with real-time data garnered from faculty’s observations captured within Brightspace and presented within Savoir.”

Philippe Proulx, Director of Student Success Services  
La Cité

## *Solution continued*



### **A CULTURE SHIFT AMONG FACULTY**

The approach also set off a sea of change in faculty member behavior. “I can observe a real culture shift,” says Singh. “Our faculty members are subject matter experts. They aren’t necessarily experts in pedagogy. But since implementing Savoir through Brightspace, it is like a switch flipped. Faculty members are now observing students. They are engaged, and asking important questions, such as ‘how should I follow up with students who have a red indicator?’ and ‘what do I do if I see a student hasn’t logged in to Brightspace in a week?’”

### **FEEDBACK IS CRITICAL TO LEARNING SUCCESS**

To help drive awareness amongst its student population and to ensure students understood the role the red, green, and yellow status indicators would play in helping them realize their educational goals, La Cité launched a promotional campaign around Savoir using email, posters, and other marketing tactics. So far, students are appreciative and enthusiastic about the Savoir student success system. “When we surveyed students in the past, overwhelmingly responses were around feedback. They wanted to know how they were doing, and if they were doing poorly, what to do about it,” says Singh.

Now, using Brightspace Valence, La Cité is able to draw faculty feedback and observations from the Gradebook tool into the student portal, presenting each student with their own individualized report card in real-time. “Students are excited about this progress meter. They are talking about the system and really care about their performance,” says Singh. “They are asking questions, such as ‘am I green, yellow or red?’ and they are putting

pressure on their teachers to be as up-to-date as possible in their observations. I think it is because it’s a really quick and easy system for students to understand. It’s not menacing. They get the paradigm that you can move from yellow to red, and from yellow to green. These are dynamics that work really well in a school setting.”

Students are also discovering they can use the Brightspace platform to extend their learning experience beyond the face-to-face teaching they receive in the classroom. “We can see students going into the system and into courses at different times of the day. It opens up new possibilities for learning. The students are leveraging the learning platform on their terms to enhance their learning experiences,” says Singh.

“The combination of quantitative and qualitative data coming from different sources provides La Cité’s early warning system with an incremental predictive validity that could never be achieved using partial data alone and paints a more accurate picture of the student’s risk areas to monitor and target for early intervention. This information allows us to combine collaboration and proactive interventions, such as the assistance of Success Coaches, one-on-one counseling, and on-site and online tutoring, to better meet the needs of our students, and to begin that planning effort even before their first day at La Cité. The intervention model provides a framework to transform the culture and professional practice within La Cité, because of the holistic view the data and Savoir provide,” says Philippe Proulx, La Cité’s Director of Student Success Services.



The first year of the Brightspace implementation focused on proving La Cité’s theory that qualitative feedback, gathered through classroom observation, is a solid predictor of a student’s success or failure rate. Over 150,000 indicators were collected through the school year from, revealing with a high degree of accuracy that if a student is identified as “at risk” by week three, they have a 50% chance of failing the course. Conversely, a student with a green indicator in week three has a 91% chance of passing.<sup>4</sup> In addition to the faculty feedback provided to Savoir through the Gradebook tool, the Brightspace platform collects and feeds the system student interaction data—including information on logins—sending information back to La Cité’s Student Information System. This information populates administrative dashboards used by faculty, college administration, and Student Services.

Adoption rates of the Brightspace platform have also risen to nearly 80% as a direct result of the faculty’s enthusiasm for Savoir student success system. In addition, La Cité’s Savoir system has relieved some of the administration load on faculty, reducing those three-hour student progress meetings to just thirty minutes, with attention now focused only on students at risk.<sup>5</sup>

Moving forward, the focus will shift from validating the Savoir model to intervention, as La Cité is now actively building out an intervention system to aid those students identified as at-risk. Planned interventions include one-on-one counseling, online tutoring, and study groups (with the latter two items being provided via the Brightspace platform). La Cité is also working with D2L to pilot a new gamification system it will implement within its language courses to boost classroom engagement, and a new ePortfolio solution leveraging the Brightspace platform’s social tools for employee professional development, evaluation, and tracking. Ultimately, La Cité would love to bring Brightspace directly into the classroom through mobile enablement.

“We now are dreaming about a mobile app that would remind faculty right before class of their students’ status,” says Singh. “Slowly but surely, we are building out a student success model we can be very proud of. Brightspace and Brightspace Valence are giving us the opportunity to extract data from the platform and expose it in a broad way for many uses.”

# About D2L

D2L is the software leader that makes the learning experience better. The company's cloud-based platform—Brightspace—is not a common one-size-fits-all learning management system (LMS). It's easier to use, more flexible, and smart. With Brightspace, you can personalize the experience for every learner to deliver real results. The company is also a world leader in learning analytics: its platform predicts learner performance so that you can take action in real time to keep them on track. Brightspace is used by learners in higher education, K-12, and the enterprise sector, including the Fortune 1000. D2L has operations in the United States, Canada, Europe, Australia, Brazil, and Singapore. | [www.brightspace.com](http://www.brightspace.com)

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