

**Mathematics & Science Centre: Expanding for Student Success**

# **Performance Needs Assessment**



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## Revisions

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## **Introduction**

### **Background Information**

The Mathematics & Science Centre (henceforth: MSC) at Vanier College was established with the primary mission of offering a peer tutoring service that has traditionally aimed to benefit students studying in pre-university science programs. Recently, the MSC has been looking to expand its tutoring service to accommodate three-year career programs.

As of August 2012, the Centre is coordinated by Harry Kavallos.

### **Overview of the Project**

The purpose of this project is to assess the feasibility and process involved in strategically preparing and positioning the MSC to offer academic support to students in Computer Science and all other three-year career programs. To that extent, this project aims to analyze, design and develop a performance solution best suited to meet the sponsor's demand of expanding the MSC tutoring service in an effort to enhance student success at Vanier College.

### **Data Collection**

The data collected for this report was gathered via an interview conducted with Safiya Simon, former MSC Coordinator from 2010-2012; Louise Gauthier, Professor and Coordinator of the Computer Science and Technology program and Judy Macdonald, Coordinator of Learning Enrichment and Support Services for Programs. Follow up interviews will be scheduled with Judy Macdonald as she is credited for the successful expansion of several academic support services at Vanier College, including The Learning Centre and the MSC. Her efforts have directly resulted in increased student success through the availability of more rigid and accommodating support services.

## The Problem

### Sponsor's Request

The project was initiated by Safiya Simon – former MSC Coordinator – who sought to expand the MSC's peer tutor offerings beyond the pre-university science programs. Specifically, she stated that:

*“The MSC has been doing an excellent job at supporting students studying in pre-university science programs for years, but Vanier has a growing number of students who are jumping into career programs and when they need help in their specialized courses, they have nowhere to go. Computer Science is one of the career programs that attracts the most students so it's worthwhile to start off by expanding the MSC to offer support for these students, especially for those in their first semester since the drop rate is highest between first and second semester. If we developed a set of online tutorials that focused on Java, students could use them as remedial tools to help keep them afloat.”*

Ms. Simon identified two main issues that helped prompt her to see a need for this initiative:

- As career programs are growing within the College, there is an increase in students requesting help with specialized topics such as: programming, computer science mathematics, etc.
- Most students that pass through the MSC looking for help in career program courses are turned away and often do not have any other means of obtaining extra help from any of the services within the College.

### Business Need

The sponsor has identified that during her time as the MSC Coordinator, she received multiple requests from students seeking tutoring in career programs. By developing a set of online tutorials for Computer Science and other career-programs subsequently, the sponsor feels that the MSC would benefit by further expanding its mandate to assist students and more importantly, the students themselves would benefit from possible increased academic success.

The MSC's current inability to effectively offer academic support services to a large portion of students creates a gap in student success between those in pre-university science and three-year career programs. This campaign will aim to close the gap by expanding its support services with the goal of increasing student success in career programs. *At the organizational level, Vanier will profit from a larger annual endowment since an increase in student success implies a decreased drop-out rate.*

## Current Performance Scenario

**Scenario I (High-school graduate with previous knowledge):** Although the transition to Cégep has been challenging, Romana is experiencing a good start to her studies partly thanks to the fact that she has previous knowledge of the topics in a lot of her courses. She knows that things will get progressively more challenging as she moves on to her second semester but by then at least she will have fully transitioned into the mindset of an autonomous Cégep student. Keen on challenging herself beyond the pace of her classes, Romana is attempting to self-learn more advanced topics and would like to find someone to push her in the right direction when she gets stuck. Teachers are willing to help her during office hours but priority generally is given to students who are stuck on in-class material. Furthermore, Romana also found that some teachers do not always respect their commitment to be present during office hours. She speaks with the program coordinator about getting help from senior students in the program or finding someone really knowledgeable in the topics but surprisingly receives little guidance about where to go next.

**Scenario II (High-school graduate with no previous knowledge):** Steven is passionate about his studies but the material is completely new to him, and on top of that, the transition from high school to Cégep has been challenging. Already four weeks into the fifteen week semester, he is struggling to keep up with the material and barely passed an assignment for one course and a quiz for another. When it finally occurs to him that he should seek help before his situation worsens, he starts to visit his teachers during their office hours. Unfortunately, Steven is left needing more help than the teachers can offer during their limited office hours. One of his teachers instructs him to visit the MSC but upon speaking to the Coordinator he finds out that no academic help is available for students taking Applied Discrete Mathematics – a course specific to his career program.

**Scenario III (Returning student with industry experience):** Events in John's life have required him to return to school. Having to balance a full-time job and schooling is not only challenging, but it leaves John with little time to seek academic help. Several recent technical issues at work have forced him to skip a few classes and now he finds himself needing remediation to catch up. He speaks to some teachers about getting help but is only available during odd hours of the evening. Some teachers refer him to some textbooks that could help him out and others point him to the MSC. Since John's program is really specific, none of the centre's tutors are able to offer any sort of sensible help. His inability to find the academic support he seeks only adds to his level of stress.

## Ideal Performance Scenario

**Scenario I (High-school graduate with previous knowledge):** Although the transition to Cégep has been challenging, Romana is experiencing a good start to her studies partly thanks to the

fact that she has previous knowledge of the topics in a lot of her courses. She knows that things will get progressively more challenging as she moves on to her second semester but by then at least she will have fully transitioned into the mindset of an autonomous Cégep student. Keen on challenging herself beyond the pace of her classes, Romana is attempting to self-learn more advanced topics and would like to find someone to push her in the right direction when she gets stuck. The program coordinator refers her to the MSC where teachers offer free help on a rotating schedule in a multitude of subjects from different career-programs. Since the time teachers give to the MSC differs from their office hours, they are much more willing to help students with topics that are out of classroom scope. Romana is finally able to not only challenge herself successfully but also manages to progress much faster thanks to the help offered.

**Scenario II (High-school graduate with no previous knowledge):** Steven is passionate about his studies but the material is completely new to him, and on top of that, the transition from high school to Cégep has been challenging. After looking over what is being asked for one of his first assignments, he remembered that his teachers made mention that academic support is available in different facets through the MSC. Aware of the support available early on, Steven sought out help from the MSC that luckily employs several senior students in his program as tutors. After regularly attending tutoring sessions, Steven not only successfully completed his first set of assignments but also received above average grades on some of his exams.

**Scenario III (Returning student with industry experience):** Events in John's life have required him to return to school. Having to balance a full-time job and schooling is not only challenging, but it leaves John with little time to seek academic help. Several recent technical issues at work have forced him to skip a few classes and now he finds himself needing remediation to catch up. Being understanding of John's situation, his teachers refer him to the MSC which is able to accommodate John and offer him assistance even though his availabilities are difficult. Thanks to the help offered, John is able to catch up for time lost and get back on track to success.

## Performance Gap

The following performance gaps have been identified:

- Performers do not have the same access to academic support services that pre-university program students do.
- Performers in three-year career programs have limited access to academic support services specific to their needs.
- Performers are not always able to benefit from teacher office hours as these hours are limited and sometimes not respected.

- Performers are not always informed early in the semester of where they can go to seek out academic help.
- Performers often seek academic support as a last resort; often too late into the semester for it to be completely effective.
- Performers who are advanced in class and autonomous do not always have access to resources that would enrich and expand their learning.
- Performers do not have access to academic support services outside of College operating hours which introduces a problem for those who are balancing a substantial work schedule.

### **Primary Job (Job 1)**

To expand the Mathematics & Science Centre's academic support service to include help for students in three-year career programs in order to ensure continued and increased student success rates.

- Where *student success* is measured by the time-to-completion of a program, performance in courses, and overall academic standing.

### **Tasks in Ideal Performance**

Main and supporting tasks are listed:

1. Determine if academic support is required.
  - Seek and receive early feedback from teachers.
  - Describe what academic success looks like.
    - If success is not being achieved, seek academic support.
2. Obtain academic support for problem topics.
  - Identify key people within the College that are good sources of information to find out more about academic support services.
    - Meet and speak with Program Coordinator.
    - Meet and speak with an Academic Advisor.
    - Meet and speak with MSC Coordinator.
  - Identify the different types of academic support services that are available.
    - Describe the services and resources that are available during College operating hours.
    - Describe the services and resources that are available outside of College operating hours.
  - Determine the type of academic support service that would work best in order to increase performance in one or more courses.

- Work with the MSC Coordinator to determine which form of remediation works best in a given situation:
    - Drop-in tutoring
    - Private (1-on-1) tutoring
    - Review sessions
    - Workshops, and tutorials (online or other)
  - Follow through with the recommended academic support type.
3. Achieve academic success and transition from new student to a Cégep graduate. \*

\* Main task (3) *Achieve academic success and transition from new student to a Cégep graduate* will become a lot more feasible if performers completed main task (1) and (2). It is also important to note that academic support alone is not the only driver and as such, other factors may impact student success.

## The Performers

### Performer Demographics

Students entering three-year career programs are in most cases transitioning directly from high school – though, this is not always the case as some students are coming with a fair amount of industry experience (see Group 3). Some of these students come in with prior knowledge related to their field of study (see Group 1) while others come in with no prior knowledge, completely new to the concepts related to their program (see Group 2).

**Group 1: High-school graduates with previous knowledge.** These students are typically highly interested and passionate about topics related to their field of study. At the same time however, motivation is usually lacking since they do not find themselves challenged by the materials being presented in class. Instead of requiring remediation, this group more commonly seeks enrichment or remediation on out-of-classroom-scope topics.

**Group 2: High-school graduates with no previous knowledge.** This group of students represents the largest demographic. These students normally struggle academically in large part because they are not used to the change between high school and Cégep environments. The difficulties in transition often distract them from expanding the program specific skills and knowledge they need to acquire in order to succeed.

**Group 3: Returning students with industry experience.** In most cases, these students are looking to be retrained as a work requirement because the skills and knowledge they possess related to their work has become obsolete. These students are typically highly motivated to succeed since they are eager to quickly finish their courses so that they can go back to work. They are often driven by the incentive of keeping their current job or a possible promotion.

### Additional Demographics:

The following general performer characteristics are also worth noting:

- The majority of students are between 17 and 19 years old. A second group of students, typically in the process of completing their second DEC, is between 20 and 25 years old. The smallest group of students, often in the process of re-training themselves or switching careers, is over 35 years old.
- As part of its Strategic Plan, Vanier is aiming to grow its international profile (Vanier, 2008). As such, approximately 3% of students in the program are from other countries.

## Performer Profiles

The following describes three examples of typical performers, one from each group described in the previous section.

**Group 1 Learner:** Romana is an 18 year old recent high school graduate that is currently enrolled in Vanier's three-year program of Architectural Technology. Her father is an architect and from a young age, Romana had taken a liking to the skill and has been drawing, drafting and more for years. First semester has been uneventful because of her introduction courses being too easy. She is instead trying to push herself to learn more advanced topics that will come in handy in semester two. Normally she would turn to her father for help as she has in the past but he is currently across the ocean completing work on a larger project in Sweden.

**Group 2 Learner:** Steven is 17 years old, fresh out of high school and has just started at Vanier in the three-year Computer Science & Technology program. He uses a computer daily but aside from knowing how to troubleshoot problems and use common applications, Steven has never programmed prior though, he considers himself pretty good with a computer and would love to become a game developer. Still, he is nervous about the course work and is still trying to keep himself in-check even though he has recently discovered that being in class is not a requirement the same way it was in high school.

**Group 3 Learner:** John has been working for the last twenty years and was recently told that he needed to update his skills after failing more than one performance review. John, a 46 year old building systems technician already holds a Cégep degree from years ago but since he never self-trained himself, his skill-set is obsolete and no longer marketable. He has made an arrangement with the program coordinator to fast track through a three-year program.

## Performer Challenges

Students in the three-year career programs who are struggling with their courses are facing a disadvantage. Whereas students in pre-university programs have access to academic support resources offered through: Student Services, The Learning Centre, and The Mathematics & Science Centre, students in specialized career programs are only able to seek support through their professors as no additional support services are currently in place for them.

## Issues Affecting Performance

**Cause of the Problem:** What follows is a model that will aim to determine the individual and environmental factors affecting performance in the previously identified performer groups. The table below briefly outlines problem areas per group. Each section is further expanded on in the sub-sections that follow. Problem areas are identified in red where a darker red represents

larger problem areas. Gilbert's six box model was used as described by Stolovitch & Keeps (2004).

		Group 1	Group 2	Group 3
<b>Individual</b>	Knowledge and Skills			
	Capacity			
	Motivation			
<b>Environment</b>	Information			
	Resources			
	Incentives			

### Context of the Individual

Knowledge and Skills
<p>Performers (Group 2) lack knowledge when it comes to some number of topics within one or more courses that they are currently enrolled in.</p> <p>Some performers (Group 3) possess a good deal of industry experience but since they have been out of formal education for a long time, they struggle with getting a grasp on course material.</p> <p>Some performers come in with previous knowledge: industry or other. Depending on their level of motivation, these individuals might seek to expand their knowledge – often beyond the scope of class material.</p>
Capacity
<p>Some performers end up committing too many hours of work per week due to financial constraints (or otherwise) and as a result, are often left with less time to dedicate towards studies and hence end up being more likely to require remediation.</p>
Motivation
<p>Performers (Group 2) sometimes enroll in a career program that seems like a perfect fit because it aligns with their interests. When the courses fail to meet a performers expectations however, they can quickly become disillusioned and lose motivation.</p> <p>The stress created by the transition between high school and Cégep often creates a lack of motivation in some students which negatively affects them academically.</p> <p>Performers (Group 1) are not challenged by the materials presented in class. Since they are already familiar with the material, they would be better motivated if they had the opportunity to enrich their learning.</p>

## Context of the Environment

### Information

Performers are not always made aware of where they can go to seek academic help. For new students who are trying to adjust to the transition, this can be a problem as they may not be sure about who to speak to or where to go if they need help with course work.

Performers might also not be used to the idea of asking for feedback. Coming from high school (Group 1 and Group 2), these newer students would have been used to a smaller environment where they would have been more monitored and given feedback frequently.

### Resources

All described performers are lacking the resources required to help them achieve academic success when they need support. Performers can turn to their teachers which may or may not be approachable or available conveniently.

Resource centers and peer tutoring programs are readily available for pre-university students but scarce for three-year career programs. Although some three-year programs have their own resource centers, they are typically small and only offer a few workstations with the required tools. None of these centers offer any sort of academic support at the moment.

### Incentives

The incentives for performers (Group 1 and Group 2) are often distant, especially for the students who are in their first semester. Since a career program normally requires 3 years at minimum to complete, the incentive of earning a DEC might not be immediate enough.

Some performers (Group 3) have a high level of incentives. Since they are much older than other performer groups on average and retraining themselves, they are looking to finish quickly so that they can return to work, start a new job, or earn a promotion. In some cases, a failure to retrain within a timely fashion can lead to job loss.

At least one consequence is similar across all performers: for those who are struggling to keep afloat in their classes and do not obtain academic support in some form, oftentimes the result is failing one or more courses.

The largest incentive for all performers that is directly linked to their performance is that a DEC will be earned once studies are completed. Since academic support is linked to better academic performance, there is strong reasoning for why performers should seek the help if it is available.

## Project Constraints

The following foreseeable constraints exist on the project:

- **Budget:** The MSC has a yearly operational budget of \$13,000 and an additional \$20,000 specifically reserved for the peer tutoring service. Historically, every year the Centre ends up over budget, thus, there is no opportunity to have the MSC fund any sort of meaningful expansion of its service. Depending on the performance campaign required, funding might need to be sought through the Academic Dean's Office, Student Services, or through external avenues.
- **Staff:** The MSC is currently overseen by its Coordinator who is a full-time employee (35 hours weekly) and a part time employee who assists him during two of the week days (14 hours weekly). Both their workloads are already at capacity and as such, an expansion of the Centre's academic support services implies that the College would have to invest in promoting the part-time assistant to full-time employee status. The constraint however is that budget restrictions might prevent the assistant from being given the additional hours – especially after the most recent cuts to education.
- **Quality:** In order to maintain the MSC's image and the reputation of its peer tutoring service, it is important that above all, the quality of the academic support offered is high. To qualify this more accurately, peer tutors who are hired must meet a minimum academic requirement and must be interviewed thoroughly by the Coordinator and faculty members from the Mathematics and Science Departments. Any sort of tutoring materials must also be passed through faculty who act as subject matter experts and ensure the quality.

## Requirements

### Business Objective

Ultimately, the business objective that this project will aim to achieve is increasing revenue. Career programs at Vanier College are known for seeing large attrition rates in comparison to the pre-university programs. In career programs, it is common for approximately 20% of the students transitioning from their first semester to their second semester to switch programs or to leave the College altogether. Like all Cégeps, Vanier's governmental endowment is directly related to student enrollment numbers. This means that the attrition in career programs affects Vanier negatively since fewer students' means a smaller annual budget.

Furthermore, this project is in-line with Vanier's 2008-2013 Strategic Plan on two main points. First, it states that Vanier will ensure that academic support services will *have the needed resources* to handle the changing needs of students (Vanier, 2008). Second, the plan states that Vanier is obligated to ensure that all incoming students *have support services to turn to* and that such support services will be modified to help students excel in their programs of study (Vanier, 2008).

### Performance Objectives

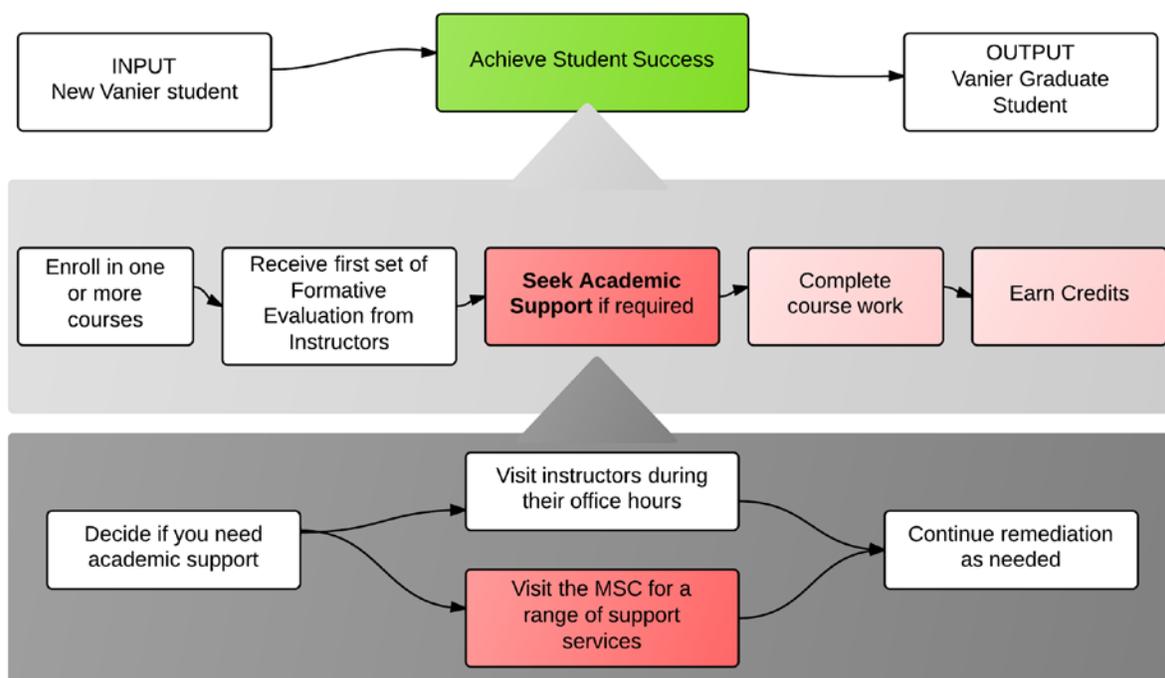
Help performers achieve academic success by expanding the Mathematics & Science Centre to offer support services for three-year career programs.

### Main & Performance Objectives

1. Given that students will receive formative feedback from their instructors, the students will determine whether or not they require academic support within the first three weeks of a given semester.
  - a. Given that at least one assignment, set of homework, or quiz has been completed, students should seek and receive feedback from teachers within the first two to three weeks of the semester.
  - b. Students should be able to describe what academic success looks like before making a decision on whether academic support is required.
    - i. If success is not being achieved, seek academic support as soon as possible.
2. Given that some students are struggling in one or more courses, these students will seek academic support and follow through with the recommended remediation as needed.
  - a. After having decided that academic support is required, students should be able to identify key people within the College that are good sources of information to find out more about academic support services.

- b. After identifying and speaking with different faculty and staff, students should be able to identify the different types of academic support services that are available to them and be aware of where they are located.
    - i. Students must be able to describe:
      1. The services and resources that are available during College operating hours.
      2. The services and resources that are available outside of College operating hours.
  - c. After having discussed their academic challenges and possible support options with a college professional, students should be able to determine the type of academic support service that would work best in order to increase performance in one or more courses during a given semester.
    - i. Students should work with the MSC Coordinator to determine which form of remediation works best in a given situation:
      1. Drop-in tutoring
      2. Private (1-on-1) tutoring
      3. Review sessions
      4. Workshops, and tutorials (online or other)
  - d. After working with college professionals to determine the ideal type of academic support service, students must follow through (begin no later than one week after seeking help) with the recommended academic support type at least until there is a notable improvement on subsequent course evaluations.
3. Given that students have sought and received academic support if it was needed, students will achieve academic success and transition from new student to a Cégep graduate within the expected time-to-completion of their career-program of choice.

## Bottleneck Analysis



Process Map showing how student success happens (specifically in three-year career programs)

On the academic level, student success is the idea of taking in new students, preparing them with the knowledge and skills required by their program and outputting Cégep graduates who have the needed competencies to continue into University or transition into the work force.

Based on current performance, student success can become a problem for students in three-year career programs. Two problem areas exist (visible in red):

(1) **Seek Academic Support.** If performers are struggling, they are likely to decide to turn to internal support services offered by the college to assist them. These services are normally free and conveniently located on campus therefore naturally; they are the first options students will explore. A bottleneck exists here due to the limitations in (2).

(2) **Visit the MSC for a range of support services.** Since the MSC is the hub for support in math and sciences, a lot of performers naturally visit the center for help. Based on current performance however, the MSC is not equipped with the resources to offer academic support to performers in career programs. This limits performers to a single avenue: visiting their instructors during their office hours which are normally not enough for the majority of struggling performers.

The existing problem areas affect the process in that performers have difficulty completing a course in good standing and earning the respective credits. As such, for some performers, achieving student success is out of reach.

**Note:** The process map above is also true of Group 1 performers who instead of looking for remediation might be looking for enrichment or remediation on concepts that go beyond classroom scope.

## Summative Evaluation

### Engagement

Performer engagement can be measured in several ways. Performers can be asked to complete engagement surveys (see below) and depending on the campaigns design, engagement could also be measured by collecting important statistics such as: analytics (for possible online tutorials), and data on performers who sign up to tutoring or review workshops.

This evaluation has been adapted from *Training design basics*, Carliner (2003).

### Survey

1. What one word would you use to describe this campaign? \_\_\_\_\_

2. How would you rate this campaign on the following scale?

1 Poor	2	3 Average	4	5 Excellent
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3. How would you rate your academic success (*measured by your understanding of the course material and grades*) before obtaining academic support?

1 Poor	2	3 Average	4	5 Excellent
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4. How would you rate your academic success (*measured by your understanding of the course material and grades*) after obtaining academic support?

1 Poor	2	3 Average	4	5 Excellent
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5. How likely are you to seek academic support within Vanier College?

1 Not Likely	2	3 Somewhat Likely	4	5 Very Likely
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6. At what point during the semester did you determine that you were having difficulties with at least one of your courses?

1 First Two Weeks	2	3 Half-way Through	4	5 Last Two Weeks
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7. At what point during the semester did you seek out academic support for the course(s) you were having difficulties with?

1 First Two Weeks	2	3 Half-way Through	4	5 Last Two Weeks
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8. How likely are you to follow through with the recommended academic support?

1 Not Likely	2	3 Somewhat Likely	4	5 Very Likely
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9. The one thing that could improve your performance most is:

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10. The one thing you liked most about the campaign was:

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11. The one thing you would improve about this campaign is:

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## Individual Performance

Evaluation at this level will aim to verify whether individual performance is met for all performers. In other words, are performers doing what they need to do?

### Student Success Checklist

The following would be completed by the MSC Coordinator or another Professional for every student that decides to receive academic support through the Centre.

Student Name: _____ Student ID: _____		
Academic Program: _____		
Required Help in: _____		
Course Instructor: _____		
Requested Academic Support on: ____/____/____		
Academic Support began on: ____/____/____		
Performance Tasks to Complete	Check	Notes
Received some level of formative feedback for the course within the first three weeks of the semester.		
Academic support was sought within the first three weeks of the semester.		
Visited course instructor during office hours on at least one occasion.		
Able to describe the academic support services available during the college's operational hours.		
Able to describe the academic support services available outside the college's operational hours.		
With help from a College Professional, was able to determine an appropriate academic support type needed.		
Academic support was started within a week of being sought.		
Completed the recommended academic support type.		

**Performer Assessment (Written)**

1. If students are having difficulties with course material, who should they consider speaking to?

Person 1: \_\_\_\_\_

Person 2: \_\_\_\_\_

2. If students are looking for enrichment or remediation, where can they go?

\_\_\_\_\_

3. Which academic support services does Vanier make available for students in three-year career programs? (select all that apply)

(A) Online tutorials covering a range of topics

(B) Classroom review and crash course sessions

(C) Peer Tutoring (at the College)

(D) Peer Tutoring (Online)

(E) Instructor office hours

(F) Other: \_\_\_\_\_ (please specify)

4. Of the academic support services offered by Vanier to three-year career program students, which service(s) are available outside of the college's operational hours? (select all that apply)

(A) Online tutorials covering a range of topics

(B) Classroom review and crash course sessions

(C) Peer Tutoring (at the College)

(D) Peer Tutoring (Online)

(E) Instructor office hours

(F) Other: \_\_\_\_\_ (please specify)

5. In general, what does academic success look like for students?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

## **Organizational Performance**

The organizational impact of the performance campaign will be challenging to measure. Though, the goal would be increased academic success and as a result, lowered attrition rates in career program students.

One possible method of measuring organizational performance would be to collect student data from each career program that can be compiled to determine: pass rates, number of students who sought academic support, changes in grades due to academic support, and more. Such data must be collected before the campaign is implemented and at least once afterwards in order to be compared.

It should be noted that the challenge in creating a metric for measuring performance at this level is that there needs to be a method of confirming that changes in student success and attrition rates in career programs are actually factors of the expanded MSC tutoring service, as opposed to being attributable to other factors.

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