



RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Rhetorica Project: Preserving Oral Histories from the French-Speaking Jesuit Classical Colleges in Montreal

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ABSTRACT

This article examines French-speaking Jesuit classical education in Montreal through oral history interviews conducted as part of the Rhetorica project, a 2024 public-history initiative highlighting the legacy of Jesuit colleges. After outlining the development of Jesuit classical education in Quebec in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this article analyzes seven oral testimonies from former students and a former teacher who attended classical colleges in the late 1950s and early 1960s. These accounts shed light on what alumni identify as most formative during the rhetoric year, including the influence of teachers, rhetorical practice in both academic and extracurricular settings, and the place of religion amid the Quiet Revolution in 1960s Quebec. This article argues that oral history captures dimensions of Jesuit educational experience largely absent from institutional records, while also emphasizing the urgency of documenting these memories as the last witnesses of the classical system disappear.

Keywords:

classical education; Montreal; oral history; Quiet Revolution; Rhetorica

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Introduction¹

The return of the Jesuits to Canada in 1844 after the restoration of their order, the Society of Jesus, was closely tied to their renowned educational expertise. Indeed, Monseigneur Ignace Bourget, bishop of Montreal, convinced Father General Roothaan to send Jesuits back to Canada to establish a college to educate laymen. As a result, in 1848, Collège Sainte-Marie opened its doors, followed by Collège Jean-de-Brébeuf and Collège Saint-Ignace. Hundreds of young men (and, much later, a few women) destined for secular or ecclesiastical careers attended these French-speaking colleges in Montreal until the classical curriculum disappeared in the 1960s, following the Parent Commission, officially titled the Royal Commission of Inquiry on Education in the Province of Quebec.

In 2024, more than half a century later, members of The Archive of the Jesuits in Canada, the Université du Québec à Montréal, Collège Jean-de-Brébeuf, the Bibliothèque de la Compagnie de Jésus, and myself, as project historian for the Jesuits of Canada, created the Rhetorica project to highlight some of this history. The project included two exhibitions, a guided tour of College Sainte-Marie's library, and three public lectures and discussions, all designed to display the history and significance of the French-speaking Jesuit classical colleges in Montreal, with a special focus on the rhetoric year (equivalent to the final year of high school).

As part of this project, I interviewed seven men who had been students or teachers at a Jesuit college in order to record and preserve their testimonies. This article presents a survey of the themes that former students highlight when reflecting on their experiences with Jesuit education and the *cours classique*. Drawing from the Rhetorica project, I begin with a brief overview of the history of Collège Sainte-Marie, Collège Saint-Ignace, and Collège Jean-de-Brébeuf, as well as the Jesuit classical curriculum, particularly the rhetoric year. I then describe the process of interviewing alumni of the classical colleges and highlight the biases inherent in this work. Finally, I present the primary themes—teachers, rhetoric inside and outside the classroom, religion and the Quiet Revolution, and values—that emerged from these testimonies.

1 My thanks to archivist Henria Aton for the proofreading of this article. This article is based on the conference François Dansereau and I presented at the International Symposium on Jesuit Studies at Boston College on June 13, 2024.

Context²

The Rhetorica project focused on Collège Sainte-Marie, Collège Jean-de-Brébeuf, and Collège Saint-Ignace.³ As previously noted, the Jesuits were specifically invited back to the British colony to found an institution of higher education for the city's Catholic French-speaking population. Over the course of its first two decades, Collège Sainte-Marie experienced rapid growth. The demographic surge at the turn of the century and the increasing demand for higher education led to the establishment of another institution, Collège Jean-de-Brébeuf, situated on the opposite side of Mount Royal. Founded in 1928, Collège Jean-de-Brébeuf was situated on the outskirts of downtown Montreal, deliberately distanced from the urban environment. The college initially accommodated at least 600 students, reflecting both the population's demand for quality education and the respected reputation of Jesuit pedagogy. Collège Saint-Ignace, founded a year earlier in 1927 in Rosemont, east of Sainte-Marie, initially admitted only prospective priests before opening the first six years of the classical program to all boys. In 1962, Saint-Ignace moved north to the Ahuntsic district and incorporated two years of philosophy into its curriculum.

All of the colleges educated students through a rigorous classical curriculum designed as a seamless progression, aiming to cultivate comprehensive intellectual development and emphasizing Western cultural foundations, particularly the convergence of Christian tradition and

2 This section is based, with their permission, on the work of François Dansereau, Patricia Prost, and Godefroy Bougie (director, archivist, and intern of The Archive of the Jesuits in Canada) in "La rhétorique dans les collèges jésuites," The Archive of the Jesuits in Canada, accessed December 18, 2024, <https://ajc.omeka.net/exhibits/show/rhetorique-j--suite>.

This exhibition is based on works such as Claude Galarneau, "Les études classiques au Québec, 1760–1840," *Les Cahiers des Dix*, no. 56 (2002): 19–49; Claude Corbo, *Les Jésuites québécois et le cours classique après 1945* (Septentrion, 2004); Claude Corbo, *Au crépuscule du cours classique québécois: Le cas du collège Jean-de-Brébeuf (1953–1964)* (Del Busso, 2021); Jean Cinq-Mars, *Histoire du Collège Sainte-Marie de Montréal, 1848–1969* (Hurtubise HMH, 1998); Louise Bienvenue, Ollivier Hubert, and Christine Hudon, *Le collège classique pour garçons: Études historiques sur une institution québécoise disparue* (Fides, 2014); Jean Guiraud, "Les jésuites ce qu'ils sont, ce qu'ils font," *L'école sociale populaire*, no. 322 (1940); Philippe Garneau and Philippe Guertin, *Les archives du Collège Jean-de-Brébeuf* (Collège Jean-de-Brébeuf, 2015); Roberte Langlois, *Les Précurseurs de l'oralité scolaire en Europe* (Presses universitaires de Rouen and du Havre, 2012); Édouard Lecompte, *Les Jésuites du Canada au XIX^{ème} siècle, Tome premier 1842–1872* (Imprimerie du Messager, 1920).

3 Putting aside Loyola College, which was established in 1896 as the only Jesuit English-speaking college in Montreal and remains active.

Greco-Roman heritage.⁴ This educational model primarily prepared students for liberal professions, such as those in law or medicine, but also paved the way for careers in fields such as commerce, the military, and journalism. The curriculum spanned eight years and included introductory Latin elements and two years of philosophy. The sixth year—the focus of this article—was dedicated to rhetoric.

Rhetoric was a cornerstone of Jesuit classical pedagogy. The foundational principles of classical education are derived from the *Ratio studiorum*, initially published in 1599. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, rhetoric shaped the rhythm of college life, manifesting itself both in the classroom and through various activities. Initially, Latin and Greek comprised the core of the rhetoric program but were gradually replaced by French and English as the twentieth century progressed. Rhetoric was rooted in humanist and Renaissance ideals, blending Catholic doctrines with the values of French-Canadian society. Consequently, classical texts by authors like Virgil and Cicero were presented alongside works about Canadian martyrs and other notable figures celebrated for their courage, virtue, or faith. Beyond learning from great writers, students were required to apply the principles of eloquence to their own work. Written assignments were evaluated based on their oratorical qualities, and students were expected to recite their texts in accordance with the rules of poetics, elegance, rhythm, and linguistic ornamentation. Rhetorical assessment took the form of biannual oral examinations, which included performances in drama or poetry recitations. Rhetoric also extended to extracurricular activities such as the *Académie de rhétorique*, which aimed to engage students in current debates as well as Canadian and Québécois historical, political, and religious issues. The *Académie de rhétorique* also fostered teamwork through the creation of student newspapers, which gave students the chance to hone their writing skills. Theater, in particular, was one of the most significant modes of communication between rhetoric students and Montreal's civil society, serving as a platform to display student eloquence, linguistic proficiency, and literary culture. While classical theater remained important, a new, more liberated performance style began to emerge in the 1940s, reflecting a true shift in societal norms. Finally, rhetoric also entered the public arena through intercollegiate oratory competitions, enabling many students to gain both achievements and recognition.

In early twentieth-century Quebec, however, rhetoric instruction faced increasing challenges within a climate of moral, technological, and industrial modernization. Over time, the classical curriculum was increasingly

4 The eight years were: Latin elements; Syntax; Method; Versification; Belles-lettres; Rhetoric; Philosophy I; Philosophy II.

questioned, especially regarding the relevance of Latin or Greek in civil society. The sciences began to occupy a more prominent place in the curriculum and the term “rhetoric” gradually disappeared, replaced by terms like “oratorical exercises” or “talents of eloquence.” The most significant change occurred in the 1960s, when Quebec entered what became known as the Quiet Revolution, a period of swift transformation in the province’s political, economic, and social landscape. The province expanded its role in many areas where the Church had previously held sway, such as health care and education. Against this backdrop, the government established a Commission of Inquiry on Education, chaired by Monseigneur Alphonse-Marie Parent.⁵ In a report published in 1964, the commission issued recommendations, notably for the creation of a ministry of education. It also questioned the role of the Catholic Church in education, suggested the abolition of classical colleges, and proposed the establishment of Colleges of General and Practical Education (CEGEP) to provide a bridge between high school and university or the workforce. These changes were intended to make education more accessible, as university admission had previously been possible only through the classical route and colleges were private and predominantly only for men. The Parent Commission sounded the end of classical colleges. In 1966, Collège Saint-Ignace began accepting girls, and, a year later, it merged with two other institutions to form Collège Ahuntsic, a CEGEP. Collège Jean-de-Brébeuf started offering the new college program in 1968 and began accepting women from the *Belles-Lettres* class onward before finally discontinuing the classical curriculum in 1972. Finally, Collège Sainte-Marie became a founding institution of the Université du Québec à Montréal in 1969.

Oral History

“Collège [Sainte-Marie] closed in ’69, so the last students [. . .] are necessarily 70 years old today,” Jacques Perron—current president of the Collège Sainte-Marie Alumni Association—told me. Given this fact, it seemed important to preserve parts of the story of (mostly) male alumni from the private colleges. Oral history, a form of historical inquiry based on dialogue, allows scholars to transcend the limitations of documentary or audiovisual sources by capturing the nuanced realities of daily life—in this case, within twentieth-century Jesuit colleges.

5 Serge Dupuis, “Royal Commission of Inquiry on Education in the Province of Quebec (Parent Commission),” *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, last modified July 30, 2024, www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/royal-commission-of-inquiry-on-education-in-the-province-of-quebec-parent-commission.

Like other sources, oral history is inherently selective: interviewees exercise agency in deciding what to share and how to present it. This selectivity is not a weakness, as historian Daniel James notes: “In particular, oral testimony enables us to approach the issue of agency and subjectivity in history.”⁶ However, Catherine Charlebois and Jean-François Leclerc remind us that the strengths of testimony should not obscure its limitations.⁷ These researchers, like others working in oral history, detail the limitations inherent in these narratives, particularly the fact that the lives recounted are shaped by class and gender biases, as well as selective omissions and amalgamations. Moreover, witnesses often provide an internal perspective and may lack awareness of alternative viewpoints or broader institutional contexts (in this instance, the internal perspective of the Society of Jesus). Nevertheless, the individuals interviewed for the Rhetorica project possessed substantial knowledge of both the internal and external dimensions of this history, shaped by their life experiences and sustained engagement with the classical colleges. The questions posed to the interviewees for this project primarily concerned college life during the rhetoric year, but what emerged was much richer and encompassed topics such as religion, the agency of youth, and social class.

The aim of conducting these interviews was to preserve and facilitate the reuse of the data collected by other researchers. These audio recordings and their transcriptions, however, represent a partial loss of data: gestures and facial expressions are not captured, and intonations and laughter do not appear in the transcriptions. All the interviews were conducted in French; thus, all the quotations used in this article were originally in French. I therefore hope that researchers who wish to use these interview resources will consult the audio recordings, which more closely capture the spoken words.⁸

Testimonials from Montreal's Jesuit Classical Colleges

Steven High points out that the value of qualitative data for secondary analysis and reuse in oral history is significantly enhanced when contex-

6 Daniel James, *Doña María's Story: Life History, Memory, and Political Identity* (Duke University Press, 2000), 124.

7 Catherine Charlebois and Jean-François Leclerc, “Les sources orales au cœur de l'exposition muséale: L'expérience du Centre d'histoire de Montréal,” *Revue d'histoire de l'Amérique française* 69, nos. 1–2 (2015): 99–136, <https://www.erudit.org/fr/revues/haf/2015-v69-n1-2-haf02314/1034591ar/>.

8 Steven High, “Au-delà du syndrome de la ‘citation payante’: Les archives vivantes et la recherche réciproque en histoire orale,” *Revue d'histoire de l'Amérique française* 69, nos. 1–2 (2015): 137–63, <https://www.erudit.org/fr/revues/haf/2015-v69-n1-2-haf02314/1034592ar/>.

tual information is thoroughly detailed for future researchers.⁹ Therefore, before analyzing the themes that emerged from the interviews, I provide here an account of the interviewees, the context of production, and certain biases inherent in this work.

I participated in the Rhetorica project initially as a volunteer, then as a part-time project historian for the Jesuits of Canada. The project was not prioritized within my professional responsibilities. Furthermore, my involvement in oral history was peripheral to the project's primary focus, which was centered on exhibitions and guided tours. These factors explain the limited number of interviews conducted. This was also my first engagement with oral history and mid-twentieth-century history. I was not fully familiar with the backgrounds of my interviewees at the time of the interviews.¹⁰ In practicing shared authority, I positioned myself as a learner, even though I would decide what stories and themes to use to reconstruct history or their experiences.¹¹ These various factors naturally influenced my stance as an interviewer and, consequently, the exchanges that took place. Ultimately, the testimonies gathered contributed to different activities within this project, enriching the archival record and preserving a part of the classical colleges' history for posterity. The interviews are to be deposited in the Archives of the Jesuits in Canada.

I interviewed seven men separately, explaining to each the framework of the project and obtaining their consent for the archiving and reuse of the interview content.¹² Six were former students and one, Bernard Carrière, S.J., a former rhetoric teacher. All had experience in Jesuit classical colleges from the late 1950s to the early 1960s. Their names were recommended by various contacts, except for Michel Lefebvre, who was directly involved in the Rhetorica project. I conducted the interviews in person at Maison Bellarmin in Montreal, where I work (Claude Corbo, Lefebvre, Carrière); in a professor's office at Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM) (Georges Leroux); and on Zoom (Jacques Girard, Jacques Perron, Renaldo Battista). Among these individuals, I already knew Lefebvre and Carrière personally, while Battista is married to a work colleague.

9 High, "Au-delà du syndrome de la 'citation payante.'"

10 The status of the people involved in an interview, and the types of relationships built, have an effect on the interviews (James, *Doña María's*, 130). Note that this wasn't the first time I'd conducted interviews: I am also a communications officer and freelance journalist.

11 Michael Frish's philosophy is explained in Charlebois and Leclerc, "Les sources orales au cœur de l'exposition muséale."

12 A woman also gave her testimony, but since she didn't give me her consent form, I will not use her story.

Table 1. List of individuals interviewed for the Rhetorica project

Name	Jesuit College	Career (extract)
Claude Corbo	Collège Jean-de-Brébeuf	professor, rector, administrator, Ordre National du Québec
Jacques Girard	Collège Sainte-Marie	Quebec deputy minister of education, president and CEO of Québecor and Montréal International, Ordre de Montréal
Jacques Perron	Collège Sainte-Marie	lawyer, lecturer at the faculty of law (Université de Montréal)
Georges Leroux	Collège Sainte-Marie	professor, philosopher, Ordre National du Québec
Michel Lefebvre	Collège Saint-Ignace (1)*	Jesuit
Renaldo Battista	Collège Saint-Ignace (2)	professor, physician, Ordre National du Québec, Order of Canada
Bernard Carrière	Collège Saint-Ignace (2)	Jesuit

*I have distinguished between the first and second Collège Saint-Ignace.

As part of the Rhetorica project, three alumni shared their experiences in a public exchange with me (Corbo at Collège Jean-de-Brébeuf; Perron and Battista at Maison Bellarmin). Additionally, François Dansereau, Patricia Prost, and I presented a lecture at the Société Historique de Montréal on Jesuit classical colleges, incorporating excerpts from the interviews, with an audience largely composed of former classical college students, both men and women, including Perron.¹³ This lecture fostered extensive discussion during the question period. The interviewees were informed of the various activities within the Rhetorica project. Thus, something like a shared authority emerged in the management of the seven testimonials.

The small sample size inevitably introduces a degree of bias in the portrayal of Jesuit classical colleges.¹⁴ Most interviewees retain positive memories, as Leroux expresses: “It was a richness, a way of life. We worked all the time, but we loved it. There was a college life; we ate together. I have nothing but happy memories. I don’t have any difficult memories.” However, several alumni noted that some of their peers did not enjoy their

13 “De la salle de classe à la cité: La rhétorique dans les collèges classiques jésuites de Montréal,” Société historique de Montréal, accessed December 18, 2024, <https://www.societehistoriquedemontreal.org/nos-activites/de-la-salle-de-classe-a-la-cite-la-rhetorique-dans-les-colleges-classiques-jesuites-de-montreal/>.

14 Other testimonies can be found in Claude Corbo, *La mémoire du cours classique: Les années aigres-douces des récits autobiographiques* (Éditions Logiques,

time at a Jesuit classical college. Claude Corbo, for instance, recounts: “The discipline, the omnipresent presence of religion, the austerity of life, the fact that every moment of the day was occupied, all this left a negative impression on a number of Quebec men of my generation.” Michel Lefebvre adds, “I don’t remember us laughing much.”

The backgrounds of the alumni interviewed are varied, though they all came from families with the means to send their children to private school.¹⁵ Michel Lefebvre, however, received a free Jesuit education. Having been involved in Jesuit activities as a child, when it came time to choose a college, the Jesuits proposed that he attend Collège Saint-Ignace in Rosemont free of charge. This institution was, according to former students, the Jesuit “nursery” or “novitiate,” and, as Lefebvre describes, a “boarding school in disguise.” This proved to be a winning strategy on the part of the Jesuits, as Lefebvre ultimately joined the Society of Jesus when he entered the philosophy program, which was not offered at Saint-Ignace at the time. Renaldo Battista, for his part, completed the first four years of his classical education at a public school (École Philippe Aubert de Gaspé), during the short period where the Montreal School Board had succeeded in persuading the Ministry of Education to offer the first four years of the classical program for both boys and girls within the public system, thereby benefiting families of more modest means. “The school board sought to demonstrate that it could provide a classical education equal to, if not superior to, that of Jesuit, Sulpician, Holy Cross, and other classical colleges,” Battista explains, emphasizing that his education was indeed excellent. However, as the School Board was unable to secure a permit from the Ministry of Education to continue the initiative, he was compelled to enroll in the newly co-educational Collège Saint-Ignace. The other alumni attended either Collège Sainte-Marie, which drew students from various neighborhoods and even Montreal’s South Shore, or Collège Jean-de-Brébeuf, which was considered more elitist (and was reputed for offering excellent snacks, according to Lefebvre).

In an era when the public transportation network was far less developed than it is today, commuting to a classical college could be a lengthy

2000); Association des anciens élèves du Collège Sainte-Marie, *L’esprit du Collège Sainte-Marie toujours là: Témoignages de 22 anciens* (Carte blanche, 2019).

15 Jacques Perron qualifies the picture, however, by explaining that some boys from underprivileged classes, perhaps 10 or 12 a year, were accepted free of charge at Collège Sainte-Marie in exchange for odd jobs (running the store, maintaining the skating rink, etc.). What’s more, at a lecture on the Rhetorica project given in 2024 at the Société Historique de Montréal, other former students in the audience pointed out that even if they knew who was receiving a free education, it didn’t affect social relations.

endeavor. Many students from Sainte-Marie, but especially those from Brébeuf, were often driven to school by their parents. Others, like Lefebvre, relied on public transit. For Lefebvre, this meant a one-hour trip early in the morning to serve Mass before class. He only arrived late once, on a day of heavy snowfall, but the prefect of discipline—a feared Jesuit—made him copy the phrase, “The future belongs to the one who gets up early,” on the grounds that the storm had been forecasted and Lefebvre should have left earlier. The memories shared by interviewees reflect this highly structured and demanding period of their lives.

The Teachers

In Jesuit pedagogy, Corbo explains, the role of the teacher was fundamental.¹⁶ “So, to train us, we were placed in the presence of larger-than-life figures, and it was the teacher, the *maître*, who mediated between us and these influential personalities.” Several of these teachers were outstanding, particularly those who, while adhering to the curriculum, infused it with their own colors.

These teachers included both laypersons and Jesuits. At Brébeuf, Father Jean-Marie Aubry introduced students like Corbo to the language of film during the rhetoric year. At Sainte-Marie, Girard recalls being taught by the lay poet Jacques Brault. At Saint-Ignace, Battista remembers Father Da Silva, who taught Homer’s works without notes or books, and the philosopher André Moreau, who “was so charismatic and unique as a teacher that when he lectured in our class, people came from all over. People would sit on the floor because it was a spectacle.” Lefebvre also speaks of other teachers who influenced him, albeit for different reasons. He mentions his rhetoric teacher, who paced back and forth during his first class, which distracted the students. “So, at one point, he was told: ‘Father, please sit down at your table. Otherwise, we won’t be able to keep up.’ ‘Really? Really? I hadn’t noticed that. Very well, then. Time to adapt.’” He also recounts the example of an “eccentric” teacher who delivered his first class entirely in Latin, standing at his desk, dressed in an academic gown, and concluding with, “You see what I could do? It would be very easy for me. I pity you. Normally, classes will be conducted in French.” Lefebvre adds that some teachers would occasionally resort to humiliating students, which he found difficult to accept. Nevertheless, many former students emphasize the lasting influence these teachers had on their lives. Leroux explains: “With many of these teachers, I admired them; I aspired to live like them; I loved their access to knowledge.” For Lefebvre, excellent teachers enabled him to contemplate a Jesuit vocation—like Corbo. Lefebvre notes that it

16 Corbo, *Les Jésuites québécois et le cours classique après 1945*, 315.

was indeed the goal of the Society of Jesus to provide young people with inspiring role models.

Were these teachers guided by the *Ratio studiorum*, often cited as foundational to Jesuit pedagogy? In Carrière's experience as a teacher for a total of three years at two colleges (in Manitoba and Montreal), young regents did not receive formal training in the *Ratio studiorum*, nor were they provided with any pedagogical training beyond receiving certain texts on instructional methods. Instead, they learned the art of teaching from senior confreres, who answered their questions and helped them develop an authoritative teaching stance. "However, it was a challenging experience from the outset [. . .] we cannot claim that we were fully prepared to become teachers by the end of this initial phase of our formation."

Rhetoric In and Out of the Classroom

For many interviewees, the rhetoric year represented a pivotal phase in their education. Corbo emphasizes that what he appreciated most about this year "was the fact that we were encouraged to study on a continuum—from poetry and the novel to what was referred to as the essay (Pascal or Montaigne) at the end of the rhetoric year—the aim being to prepare us for the philosophical studies that were to follow." According to Carrière, this year was instrumental in shaping students' judgment and cultivating their aesthetic sensibilities. For young men learning to establish themselves in society through, for instance, political involvement, it was essential to know how to engage with and appeal to an audience. Recognizing that not all students were natural orators, the former teacher emphasized the importance of working with young people at their individual levels, including those who were more reserved, to help them uncover their potential. According to Leroux, it was precisely at this stage that students' temperaments began to surface, with some drawn to literature, others to writing. The rhetoric year provided the ideal opportunity to experiment with various modes of communication, although it was not limited to this alone. Students continued their training in mathematics, biology, and chemistry alongside their work in rhetoric and public discourse, which was covered in the French course. As Girard notes, "The training I received at college enabled me to write correctly, speak correctly, and develop a lifelong appreciation for public speaking and communication."

In the classroom, students engaged in extensive writing and were also required to memorize numerous texts. Leroux recalls that Saturdays were dedicated to reciting passages from renowned speeches, tragedies, or other texts in French, Latin, or Greek—a difficult exercise for some. Nonetheless, classroom activities appear to have left a lesser impression on those inter-

viewed than extracurricular activities rooted in the academic framework but extending beyond the conventional classroom environment, such as theatrical productions. Collège Sainte-Marie benefited from the amphitheater in the basement of its church (the Gesù), which also hosted theater workshops and professional actors from the newly established Nouvelle Compagnie Théâtrale. In comparison, for a long time Brébeuf students only had a temporary stage set up in the refectory. As for the nature of these performances, in all-male colleges the repertoire typically comprised plays with exclusively male roles. In some cases, male students portrayed female characters. In 1962, for instance, Corbo's class staged Racine's *Britannicus*, with students in disguise playing the roles of Agrippina and her servant. More rarely, a young woman was invited to perform, as was the case in Lefebvre's class. Not all students took to the stage, as some were involved in other aspects of theatrical production, such as makeup, set design, program creation, ticket sales, and costume preparation.

Another major pedagogical activity during the rhetoric year was the students' participation in intercollegiate oratorical competitions, for which the young men had to write, memorize, and deliver speeches in front of an audience. The competition began within each class, followed by a contest between the top students from each rhetoric class, performed before an audience of their college peers. At Sainte-Marie, Perron recalls a brief moment of hesitation before addressing his classmates gathered in the Gesù amphitheater, as he had never spoken before such a large audience. He ultimately delivered his speech successfully.

Rhetoric was also practiced beyond the classroom through extracurricular activities, such as student newspapers. This involvement fostered skills in writing, analysis, and opinion formation. Although intended primarily for internal distribution, these newspapers sometimes influenced the broader community, particularly as societal openness increased in the 1950s. Corbo, for instance, contributed to Brébeuf's monthly journal. One issue in 1962 was particularly notable. In the midst of a provincial election campaign between the Parti Libéral and the Union Nationale, Corbo published an article titled "L'Union Nationale n'est pas mûre pour le pouvoir" ("The Union Nationale is not ripe for power"). The National Student Press awarded him a certificate for having published the first politically engaged article in a student newspaper. However, Union Nationale supporters among the parents complained to Brébeuf's rector. Political discourse also reached students in other ways. Perron notes that at Sainte-Marie, the recently established Students' General Association organized Friday lunchtime debates. Several prominent speakers participated, including René Lévesque, future premier of Quebec.

In this way, students were trained in various dimensions of public discourse through literature, the arts, journalism, and political engagement.

Religion and the Turning Point of the Quiet Revolution

The Church and religion played a fundamental role in schools, particularly in Jesuit institutions, prior to Quebec's Quiet Revolution. As previously noted, the Quiet Revolution, which unfolded in the 1960s, marked a period of profound social, economic, and political reforms that facilitated the emancipation of Quebec society, primarily through the modernization of the state and the secularization of institutions.¹⁷ All former students I interviewed attended classical colleges during this pivotal period.

While many interviewees spoke of the changes ushered in by the Quiet Revolution, only Corbo provided an in-depth account of religious practices during his college years. "There were," he describes, "two calendars, one academic and the other religious, and the latter took precedence over the former. At Brébeuf, religious practices were conducted throughout the academic year. At the beginning of each school year, a day-long retreat was held in the chapel to refocus students dissipated by the summer vacation. One of the preacher's sermons was dedicated to describing the hell that awaited us if we did not lead a virtuous and religious life. Well, we listened to that with a touch of skepticism." During the first six years of the classical curriculum, at least in the 1950s, Corbo continues, students were required to complete a compulsory course in Catholicism, the successful completion of which was necessary to advance to the next academic level. Each student also had a director of conscience and was required to meet with him at least four times a year to obtain a note needed to advance to the next year. Corbo notes that, until the late 1950s—when Cardinal Léger allowed students to attend Sunday Mass with their families—all young men were required to attend college on Sundays to partake in the Eucharist with their peers, while boarders had mandatory Mass every morning. At Saint-Ignace, Lefebvre even had to arrive early for weekday Mass as a day student. "Until the early 1960s, the entire college environment was permeated by religious beliefs and practices. That didn't necessarily make us good Christians," Corbo reflects.

According to him, the Church's influence at Collège Brébeuf extended to other aspects, including censorship of books. Library books were approved by the Jesuits, and books brought from home required authorization from the prefect of discipline, who inspected the text, checked referenced works,

17 Catherine Larochelle nuances this clear-cut separation between the "Grande Noirceur" and the "Quiet Revolution" in her book *Marie-Louise et les petits Chi-nois d'Afrique* (Mémoire d'encrier, 2024).

and, if approved, initialed the first page of the book to signify his consent. It was possible to obtain permission to read a book on the *Index*, but this involved additional steps. One day, Corbo recalls, he asked his teacher if he could read Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le Noir*, a nineteenth-century novel centered on the ambition and romance of a young provincial aspiring to succeed in Paris. "My teacher said, 'Yes, it's possible, but we'll need permission from the Archdiocese of Montreal.' So, at my teacher's request, I wrote a letter, which he himself forwarded to the Archdiocese of Montreal, no doubt with a letter of recommendation [. . .]. Eventually, I received a parchment from the Archdiocese of Montreal authorizing Claude Corbo to possess and read the works of Stendhal." He has kept this authorization to this day.

As Lefebvre mentioned earlier, the Jesuits hoped that many students, ideally the most promising, would consider a Jesuit vocation as they progressed through the colleges of the Society of Jesus. This approach was effective to some extent, but according to Corbo, by the early 1960s, far fewer students were considering the Jesuit path. "These were the early years of the Quiet Revolution. The cultural, social, and moral climate in Quebec was shifting. Religious vocations were far less common than before." Not only were the Jesuits receiving fewer applications for the novitiate, but some Jesuits, including teachers, chose to leave the Society. Carrière was required to serve an additional year as a regent to replace a Jesuit who had decided to return to secular life. "People were questioning themselves," the Jesuit explains. These departures were often a source of personal distress for him.

A sense of change was thus pervading Quebec society, and this wave of newfound freedom and optimism gradually infiltrated Jesuit colleges, challenging certain elements of an education that, according to Corbo and Leroux, had changed little from the previous generation. Corbo notes, "When I left Brébeuf in 1964, the Quiet Revolution had already been underway for four years. The world was completely different." Among other changes, Battista highlights, "There was a very significant backlash against the sanctimonious Church we'd known before, which had colluded with the political power of Duplessis [the conservative leader of the Union Nationale Party]." As a teacher, Carrière recalls that young people were becoming more critical, and teachers had to adapt. For Carrière, who had just spent two years as a regent at a more traditional college in Manitoba, finding himself at Saint-Ignace amid a transforming society was a sudden and challenging experience.

This is not to suggest that the Jesuits in Quebec were inflexible. "What's interesting," Battista told me, "is that we were in a Jesuit college, yes, but with Jesuits who had very, very, very broad perspectives, so they weren't afraid to question certain aspects that may have represented excesses in

the Catholic Church or Christianity.” According to Perron, while having a significant number of lay teachers introduced a certain openness, the Jesuits themselves were also relatively tolerant or permissive regarding new student initiatives, such as forming a student association or organizing lunchtime lectures. Perron recalls that, in the early 1960s, the Collège Sainte-Marie student newspaper conducted a survey on student adherence to the Catholic faith. “The results were understandably somewhat surprising. The findings reached Cardinal Léger’s desk, and the rector had to undertake some adjustments.” For many young people, this period of transition left an enduring impression of vibrancy and intellectual dynamism. For Perron, for instance, this dynamism manifested in seeing Sainte-Marie alumni involved in Quebec’s transformation as intellectuals, politicians, and union leaders. Young people were also becoming more open to the world beyond their college. Battista would frequent a nearby *boîte à chansons* (folk music bar) with friends to listen to emerging musicians and meet new people, embracing the spirit of change.

Caring for Others

As the Society of Jesus says today, Jesuits aim to form “men and women for others.” This was already the explicit objective of the colleges when the interviewees were students, and this goal was clearly articulated. Carrière, as a teacher, understood that he needed to help students discover their relationship with the world and recognize their responsibility to give back to society: “not just to become professionals, but to be accountable for what they had received in college.” Corbo, however, notes that today’s sensibility differed somewhat from that of the time: “It was present in forms at first that wouldn’t appeal to contemporary culture. You know that charity is an absolutely fundamental Christian virtue—love your neighbor, even more than yourself. So yes, we had this concern for others.”

This ethos of self-giving was instilled early in Jesuit education. Leroux explains that students were invited by the rector or teachers to support families with fewer resources, sometimes even encouraging parents to contribute to the education of disadvantaged students. “What’s more,” he continues, “some students were matched with richer peers because they did not live in a favorable environment or did not have the necessary resources to succeed academically.” For example, Leroux assisted a student raised by a single mother, a rare situation. The student would study at Leroux’s home and occasionally stay overnight. The alumni interviewed were acutely aware of the privilege of receiving a Jesuit education and understood that this privilege implied, in the Ignatian spirit, a duty to give back to society

upon completing their studies. It is a commitment that each fulfilled by becoming a Jesuit, engaging in politics, or serving as a lawyer or professor.¹⁸

Conclusion

I conclude with Battista's words: "To learn the trade of life, it's been the classical course. Reflection on the fundamental questions. Who are we? Where do we come from? Where are we going? These are the most important questions." The interviews conducted for the Rhetorica project capture only a small fraction of life at Jesuit colleges, yet they provide valuable insight into the experience of Ignatian education in the mid-twentieth century. While each alumnus had their own unique experiences and memories, the oral histories suggest that the classical Jesuit college had a lasting and profound impact on these men.

The interviewees represent the last cohorts to have attended a classical French-speaking Jesuit college in Montreal. A broader project to gather diverse perspectives from alumni—particularly women, individuals from more disadvantaged backgrounds, and additional teachers—would enable us to preserve more representative fragments of these colleges' histories and, more broadly, of mid-twentieth-century Quebec society navigating between tradition and modernity.

Still, the testimonials gathered for the Rhetorica project offer a distinct dimension to historical inquiry that differs from documentary, photographic, or cinematographic archives, revealing how these young people experienced this pivotal era from within and underscoring what held the greatest significance and made the greatest impact on them. The excerpts presented here suggest that interpersonal relationships—whether supportive or disciplinary—had a more profound influence on students than classroom assignments or exercises. Through interactions with teachers and peers in various schools and extracurricular activities, engagement with and questioning of religious elements, and broader societal influences, their learning was shaped and solidified during their college years.

18 This is still the case today, as we read in José Sanchez and Fannie Dionne, "Responding to a Fractured World, Regis College Trains Tomorrow's Leaders," *Jesuits of Canada*, accessed December 18, 2024, <https://jesuits.ca/stories/responding-to-a-fractured-world-regis-college-trains-tomorrows-leaders/>.