

A COLLEGE ADMINISTRATOR'S FULBRIGHT TRIP THROUGH FRANCE: DISCOVERING WHAT OUR EDUCATIONAL SYSTEMS CAN LEARN FROM EACH OTHER

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ABSTRACT

As a participant in the 2022 International Education Administrators award trip to France, I took advantage of the opportunity to compare and contrast French and American higher education systems, using the dual lens of someone who worked and studied in France, along with my current position of STEM dean at a community college. My dual goals during the experience were to evaluate the French education system and resource internationalization opportunities for my institution.

Keywords: community college • French education • higher education system comparison • international education administrator's program



USING THE FULBRIGHT INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION AWARD (IEA) FOR RESEARCH

As a long-time proponent of internationalization of curriculum (in particular, STEM curricular areas as I oversee the science and engineering division of my college), my interest in other countries' educational systems led me to look for opportunities available through the Fulbright organization to expand our division's international reach. Covid put a temporary halt to any travel-abroad plans, but this delay fortuitously expanded my interest in virtual study abroad and course internationalization, as well as allowing me the time to do a little "pre-research" prep related to higher education in Europe-and specifically France- since that was the targeted country of my application.

In preparation for my Fulbright trip, I first wanted to get a perspective on the relative breadth and depth of the American and French higher education (HE) systems; please note, for administrators thinking of applying for an IEA grant, that creating a research study is *not* a requirement for this particular Fulbright grant. Starting with a review of available US government data, and looking at various sites such as "Statistica", I found out that the percent of HE enrollment in France to total population was analogous to what we see

in the United States; although naturally a lower number of students (since France's population is 1/5th the size of the US) - 4% of their populace was enrolled in higher education last year while, in America, currently 5.9% of our population takes part in HE coursework.

The structure of HE in both countries has evolved into a tri-partite system, with three levels distinguishing different types of institutions. At the top of both systems sit the highly selective research institutions. Think of the Ivy League colleges in the US while, in France, these institutions are known as *Grand Écoles*. While on my Fulbright trip, we visited one of the most famous of the *Grand Écoles*, the Sorbonne, and their administration took great care in describing to our group how selective they were-in student acceptance, in faculty appointments, as well as in the foreign institutions with which they chose to collaborate for research purposes. Our Fulbright group members chuckled after the visit, noting that, although we considered our Fulbright award to be a prestigious and positive reflection on our institutions, none of our colleges were considered being potential future collaborators to Sorbonne administrators, leading me to more fully understand that all countries apparently experience elitism in educational circles.

The middle range of HE in both countries consists of the university system which, in France, are primarily public systems (I found, during my Fulbright trip, that there are significantly fewer private institutions of higher education in France than in the US). Like their US counterparts, French universities are comprehensive in scope but, unlike most American universities, they accept virtually all secondary education graduates, which accounts for the fact that 40% of French university students drop out before tertiary school completion (more analogous to American community college completion rate).

The third level of HE in both countries comprises two-years and specialized schools. As an administrator at an American community college, I was very interested to see if they had developed a French counterpart system, and the answer is.....“yes-and no”. Our Fulbright group visited a very impressive two-year institution in Seaux (a Paris suburb) that is part of a recently developed country-wide system called *Instituts Universitaires de Technologie*, more commonly known as IUTs. Although somewhat analogous to America's community college system, one major difference-about which I expressed some jealousy, is that IUTs are highly selective in their admission protocols-the Seaux IUT accepts one out of twenty applicants. IUT student graduates may choose to either enter directly into the workplace, or transfer into the French university.

KEY DIFFERENCES BETWEEN HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEMS

Possibly the most marked difference between the French and US higher education systems that I discovered is their difference in administrative/regulatory structure. While the US higher education system is highly decentralized (reflective of our nation's culture), the French education system is managed by a strong centralized governmental presence that controls everything from financial support to the awarding of all tertiary degrees. Alcouffe and Miller, who have written extensively on structural differences between French and American educational systems, point out that this centrally controlled funding mechanism has resulted in a far lower cost for French students to complete their higher education (less than half the cost the average American students pays). At first, I was envious, on behalf of our students, that a higher education degree could be obtained at such a relatively low cost. But our counterpart French administrators (usually over the cocktail hour) were quick to point out that there are both advantages-such as low tuition costs-but also marked disadvantages, to such a degree of centralization and governmental oversight.

For example, French university administrators have relatively little authority to make overarching budgetary strategy plans and it is the central ministry, not the individual institution, that makes major financial decisions. This difference is also reflected in regulatory processes. American higher education prides itself on its ability to self-regulate and this quality assurance process has traditionally been one of peer review. So far, this has allowed colleges in the U. S. to withstand considerable outside pressure, sometimes from political forces, to be controlled by governmental entities. In contrast, the French quality assurance system is controlled by the French Council for Evaluation of Research and Higher Education (HCERES). Some HE analysts, like Alcouffe and Miller, believe that this difference in quality assurance control is based on deeply embedded cultural differences (i.e. Americans have long balked at any sort of nationally based control system).

STUDENTS' PATHWAYS DIFFER

The US system offers students a great deal of flexibility and freedom in their higher educational choices. Higher education in the US is generally designed to offer a breadth of offerings, exposing students to a variety of fields in the freshman and sophomore years. In juxtaposition, most French universities concentrate on depth, offering a specific course of study from day one of the students' higher ed experience. While US students entering college usually identify a proposed field of interest, they take general education coursework (often termed core curriculum) which is designed to be accepted at most colleges, should the student decide to transfer schools (which is a common practice in the United States).

In contrast, French students usually must apply to a specific degree program and start immediately into that field of study. Students then take exams after years two, three, and four of their higher ed experience in order to move forward in their educational pursuits. French students also have much less opportunity to “swirl” from one educational institution to another (this seemed to be a foreign concept to French administrators). Especially in the IUTs, all coursework is oriented towards their future industry focus, with no general core courses taken.

During our trip, we visited a college prep academy and had the opportunity to speak with students (primarily those in what we would call their junior year of high school). Those students described how they were already studying many hours each week outside of class, prepping for their high stakes college entrance examination that would determine where and how they would spend the next three to four years of their academic life (as well as their future career path). When asked about test prep courses, they seem dumbfounded that parents would pay for that extra help and pointed to a stack of study guides in their library as their primary test prep resource. This made me ask myself such questions as “do we coddle our children through the academic process?” and “are the French students better prepared, as they enter the workforce, for the expectations they will face?” On the other hand, I keenly felt the pressure the French students we interviewed were under and wondered if such high stakes testing and early narrowing of academic and career choice had any negative bearing on the students’ mental health.

DIFFERENCES IN APPROACH TO DEI INITIATIVES

In recent years, the importance of diversity and inclusion has vaulted to the forefront of American higher education policy, and institutions have been motivated, through both “carrot and stick” efforts, to provide additional opportunities for equity and inclusion—both for students and employees. Indeed, as a community college administrator, this movement is constantly in the forefront of decisions I make regarding who to hire and how to best serve our students. As my college is a Hispanic serving institution, a plethora of statistical information is available on our efforts to make progress on diversity measures, starting with data published by US governmental entities, as well as data compiled by the individual institution.

In juxtaposition to US efforts, although there seemingly is interest in France on improving HE student diversity, there is relatively little information on French HE student racial breakdown. Because I was puzzled by this difference in approach, I did some research in advance of my trip and also queried my French counterparts on this phenomenon, discovering an interesting reason for the difference. In general, France has an aversion to collecting data on race and ethnicity; in fact, French constitutional law prohibits the collection of data on an individual’s race, ethnicity or religion, and French culture shies away from legitimizing racial identity.

When I asked about this propensity to shy away from such analyses, (in informal conversations) I was told that this restriction has its derivation from the last world war, when French authorities classified Jewish citizens in such a way that enabled their deportation to Nazi concentration camps. The French political establishments now tend to dismiss any attention paid to race and shy away from discussion of ways to fight inequalities in education, citing that such discussions contradict the idea of French universalism. During our informal conversations, my administrative counterparts in France acknowledged that, while they realize the benefit of diversity initiatives, their hands are tied by governmental regulations and they would “get their hands slapped” should they attempt to create a diversity profile for their campus.

PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL IMPACT

One might begin with this question: “who would *not* want to participate in an all-expense paid trip through France, especially one where the accommodations overlooked the Seine, with Notre Dame Cathedral in the background?” Certainly, I consider myself fortunate to have been chosen to participate in this incredible experience and it provided an opportunity to both professionally re-energize and reconfirm my commitment to international education. But I want to ‘warn’ those who might consider applying for a Fulbright IEA that it’s an extremely intense experience-and certainly not a vacation! During our 14-day trip, we received only one-half day off, and our days often started before 8am, with us dragging back into the hotel well after dark.

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The French Fulbright organization (and I’ve subsequently heard this is true for other IEAs) wanted to afford us maximum exposure to every genre of education, in various parts of France, so we visited over twenty educational and governmental entities during the trip. If such an experience was planned in the US, it would be natural for the planners to reserve a luxury bus to drive the group around from location to location. But we soon learned that, whether for cost-savings purposes or perhaps due to cultural differences, Europeans travel more on foot and by more economical modes of transportation. So those of us with smart watches clocked many thousands of steps each day and quickly learned to navigate public transit systems. I returned to the US exhilarated-but also exhausted!

In terms of what I was able to bring back to my campus and immediately implement from my Fulbright experience, I returned with a notebook full of contacts and ideas on new ways to internationalize our curriculum. I have been able to set up a number of Webex discussions and presentations between

French and American faculty counterparts, which may well lead to virtual learning communities in STEM curriculum areas. By sharing my Fulbright experience in meetings and conference presentations, I have motivated both faculty and administrators to apply for 2024-25 Fulbright award opportunities.

One of the difficulties I find that must be overcome is community college employees' lack of knowledge regarding Fulbright, in general, and the requirement of a research component, in particular (our faculty are not required to conduct research in their work). My enthusiasm has also been tempered somewhat by reality. Bureaucracy exists on both sides of the Atlantic, budgets are tight, and already overworked faculty are sometimes reluctant to take on new projects. But I am practicing patience and believe that what I learned during my Fulbright experience will pay off for our students in the long run. I can honestly say that, as someone who has been in higher education for over twenty-five years, my Fulbright experience has reenergized me, so I approach each day with a renewed effort to support both our students-and our employees-achieve their goals.

NOTES

1. Alcouffe, A, & Miller, J. (2010). *A comparison of the organization of higher education systems in France and the USA*. Working Papers, University of Delaware, Department of Economics.



Entering the University of Angers to discuss potential virtual NASA collaborations

BIOGRAPHY

A 2022 recipient of the Fulbright International Education Administrator's award, the author currently works as a STEM dean at Lone Star Community College in Houston, Texas. She is a graduate of the Higher Education Administration doctoral program at Texas A&M University and, with her master's in business administration, previously worked as a business professor and business marketing manager for various companies. A strong advocate of giving back to the local community, Claire serves as a board member of a foundation that raises scholarships for first generation college students. Claire can be reached at claire.phillips@lonestar.edu
