

A Meaningful French Education: Experiential Learning in French

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FRENCH IS HARDLY a language of dwindling importance. Whether it pertains to national demographics, foreign trade, international diplomacy, or national security, French continues to be a language widely practiced and in demand. With regard specifically to French-language study, the *2010 NRCCUA Cooperative Research Report* shows that when asked what language they would most be interested in studying if they had any option available to them, high school students across the country indicated that French was the second most desired language of study, nearly tying Spanish for first place, 16.5% compared to 16.6% of respondents. Concerning language study in general, the *2011 NRCCUA Cooperative Research Report* provides data showing a steady increase since 2007 in the number of high school students who are considering a college major or career in foreign languages. A 2009 MLA report (Furman et al.) shows that enrollments in language courses other than English have grown 6.6% from the previous survey in 2006. The three most popular languages remain Spanish, French, and German. Enrollments in French showed a 4.8% increase from 2006 while Spanish and German recorded gains of 5.1% and 2.2% respectively. Attenuating these positive signs, the report's authors note that "the ratio of enrollments in modern languages per 100 total enrollments in higher education remains at 8.6" (4–5). This is nearly half of the highest ratio of 16.5 recorded in 1965; however, the 8.6 ratio is the highest since 1972.

Despite the importance of the French language, other, more alarming trends exist as well. A 2006 report issued by the Committee for Economic Development, *Education for Global Leadership*, highlighted the need for global skills in order to meet the challenges the United States faces to its economy, national security, and society. The authors made a bold appeal for internationalizing education: "An educated American in the twenty-first century should be proficient in at least one foreign language, have studied at least one global issue or region in depth, and be knowledgeable of the geography and history of our country as well as other world regions" (13). While objectives like these are good news to language professionals, the report presents a gloomy current state. In particular, it points out that the No

Child Left Behind Act of 2002 focused narrowly "on measurable goals in reading and mathematics" (13). Consequently, resources were shifted away from languages, resulting in the reduction or elimination of courses. Shockwaves hit our profession when the *Chronicle of Higher Education* reported on 3 October 2010 that the president of SUNY, Albany "ordered the suspension of new admissions to [...] classics, French, Italian, Russian, and theater."

That said, we believe the study of French has a bright future in the United States, but only if we recognize the challenges facing French-language education. In today's economic climate, students and parents want the study of French to lead, as directly as possible, to post-graduate employment or study. More generally, university administrators want to see language education become more interdisciplinary in nature, produce global citizens, attract large numbers of majors, and result in high job-placement rates. Professional programs are reluctant to encourage the study of French until they are assured that French and Francophone studies truly complement and/or reinforce students' concentration on their professional study. And finally, many French programs want to graduate students with advanced linguistic and cultural proficiency, but we also want these students to enter life inspired by their understanding of French and Francophone literature, philosophy, history and art, so that they seek to contribute throughout their lives to the betterment of humanity. Confronted with all of these challenges, and also with diminishing resources, what is a French program to do? Our answer: blend the traditional and the professional/practical to create a powerful synergy of two often unnecessarily disparate educational components.¹ In other words, we encourage building cross-disciplinary programs with French experiential learning opportunities so as to meet the demands of students, parents, and administrators, while simultaneously expanding the reach of French literary, cinematographic, artistic, philosophical, and historical education to even more students.

In what follows, we will trace the rise of French professional education and experiential learning at University of Rhode Island (URI) and we will explain how we are charting the course to provide professional education and experiential-learning opportunities for each of our French students. We will address the challenges with which we have been confronted in our pursuit to expand professional education and meaningful experiential-learning opportunities for our students. Finally, we will explain the benefits of bilateral partnerships to experiential learning both on the URI campus and abroad. We hope that by sharing our experiences, we will provide tools and inspiration to French-language programs that are either facing challenges of irrelevance or seeking to create a meaningful and professionally productive French-language education for their students.

The URI French curriculum is by no means a revolutionary one. We offer a four-course language-learning sequence followed by an array of advanced courses, some of which focus on skill development, others on literature and film, and still

others that are more specialized (business French; the history of French in North America). While this may make our curriculum traditional, our program is revolutionary in that, despite major budget cuts from the state and the university, despite retiring faculty, and despite competition from a new well-funded Chinese program, we have consistently maintained over 100 majors each year for the past five years and have graduated between 14 and 26 majors each year over the same period. We are also revolutionary in that a growing number of our students graduate from the French program with language proficiency, an enthusiastic appreciation for French intellectual traditions, and, more importantly, French/Francophone professional experience in their primary field of study. Despite the trying economic climate in which we currently work, and despite being one of the smallest (if not the smallest) state universities in the nation, we have grown to become one of the largest and most innovative French programs in the country. In fact, at the Convention of the *Fédération des Alliances Françaises USA* in October 2012, French Ambassador François Delattre, in his address to the assembly, insisted upon the URI French program as a “pilot” for innovative undergraduate French-language education. He singled out URI because, in his eyes, we have built one of the most vibrant and interdisciplinary French programs in the nation, through professional and experiential-learning partnerships with French schools and businesses in the fields of engineering, pharmacy, business, fashion merchandising and marketing, and political science. In addition, we are now focusing on expanding our partnerships to the fields of marine affairs, marine sciences, and the biological sciences more generally.

We are often asked how we established our five dual-discipline programs (French and Engineering, French and Pharmacy, French and Business, French and Fashion, and French and Political Science). It took the work of a couple of pioneers to whom we are indebted, a subsequent vision of our own to bring experiential learning to each of our students, and a lot of patience. Also, our two “secrets” with regard to building a dynamic cross-disciplinary French program are: 1) focus on building one interdisciplinary program into a model that others will want to emulate; and 2) for subsequent programs, identify departments where a French or Francophone connection already exists before approaching them with the idea of building a collaboration.

At URI, the French program is indebted to the International Engineering Program (IEP), created in 1987, which pioneered cross-disciplinary language programs. The idea was hatched over a backyard fence when John Grandin, Professor of German, chatted with his neighbor, Hermann Viets, Dean of the College of Engineering. The personal connection between the two helped bridge the divide between two very different disciplines.² The IEP, which at first was essentially a German-Engineering Program, expanded in 1996 to include French. The hiring of a French professor who was also a former analytical chemist was essential to the growth of the French IEP.

The French IEP is a five-year program in which students earn two degrees: a BS in a field of engineering and a BA in French. The cornerstone of the program is the required six-month engineering internship that students do in a French-speaking country. In the spring semester of their fourth year, students are placed by the French IEP advisor in internships that fit their engineering training, and they are expected to use French on a daily basis at work. For students, an extra year of study certainly constitutes a larger investment of time and money. However, a few factors lighten this burden. First, an agreement at the level of the university provost grants in-state tuition for both incoming and outgoing students in exchange programs. Second, while interning, students receive a stipend averaging 1000 Euros per month from the host company. Also during the internship, students can earn up to 6 credits in French through FRN 315 and FRN 316, French Internship Abroad. To earn these credits, students must write 10 bi-weekly reports in French, reflecting on their experience and demonstrating interaction with the local culture. In addition, nearly all French IEP students precede the internship with a semester of study at our partner institution, Université de Technologie de Compiègne (UTC), where they take French language, engineering, and general education classes. With the semester at UTC and the six-month internship, students get a full year's worth of experience in a French-speaking setting. They return to URI thrilled with their experience (Erickson). The fully-packaged program of the IEP requires one extra year of study, one extra semester of tuition, and a lot of grit. But students finish the program with six months of work experience, advanced language skills, and a near 100% job placement rate. These are the incentives that draw students to the program.

In the early 1980s, and on a different end of campus, another pioneer was at work. Predating the IEP, Professor of Pharmacy Pierre Sado (from Université de Rennes 1 hospital) and URI Dean of Pharmacy Louis Luzzi were elaborating a modest program of their own. The now-retired Associate Dean of Pharmacy, Joan Lausier, recalls:

[Sado and Luzzi] thought it would be a great opportunity for French students to observe and participate in clinical-practice settings as it represented the future for the profession. [They also wanted to give] American students the opportunity to see how the profession was practiced in another country, and to have a more international perspective in their training.

Students from Rennes would come to Rhode Island over the summer to work in a pharmacy laboratory and in a community pharmacy. However, for many years no URI student ever went to Rennes.

It was not until the advent of the French IEP, and our subsequent revelation that we should be identifying other departments in which French or Francophone

connections existed, that we discovered the Franco-American partnership in the College of Pharmacy and we began talking to them about combining the B.A. in French with the College's six-year Doctorate of Pharmacy. At the end of the discussions, we had in place a program that allows students to do two of their three required pharmacy rotations in France, to use French classes in place of some required electives, and to receive a B.A. in French as well as a Doctorate in Pharmacy. It is the College of Pharmacy in conjunction with Université de Rennes 1 that places students in rotations.

We learned two lessons from our partnership with the College of Pharmacy. The first was that on campuses all across the nation, collaborative research, teaching and service already exist between American and French professors. However, because French programs are defined mostly as language and literature programs, French faculty members are often unaware that these collaborations already exist. This is a missed opportunity because it is in the pre-existing affinities and relationships between American and French scholars where ground for the establishment of cross-disciplinary partnerships is the most fertile. The said department will be much more willing to cooperate and negotiate obstacles if someone in the department has a vested interest in seeing the partnership flourish.

The second lesson was that while the IEP, with its promised internships, could be considered a model for cross-disciplinary partnerships and experiential education, the model of a URI advisor who receives a course release to find these internships was not replicable. We needed to move more in the direction of the Pharmacy model, that is, toward a model of cross-disciplinary partnership that would place the responsibility of internship placement on the French institution and the corresponding URI department. In the case of the French-Pharmacy program, the Université de Rennes 1 Pharmacy program places our students in French rotations and the URI Pharmacy program places the Rennes students in American rotations.

Initially, we expanded more in the direction of the IEP by creating the French International Business Program (IBP). Like the IEP program, the IBP program is a five-year program, with students earning a degree in Business Administration (Accounting, Finance, Marketing, etc.) and in French. Students do a semester of study at our partner institution, Euromed in Marseille, and then they intern for six months in a French-speaking country where they must use French in their daily work (the first French IBP student completed her internship in December 2011). Again, as in the French IEP Program, the French IBP advisor finds and places students in internships. While the French IBP is proving to be a successful program, the university is no longer giving additional course-release time for a program director who wishes to take on the burden of setting up international internships for our students. Consequently, we have had to modify our approach to expanding our cross-disciplinary programs.

While inspired by the IEP and the IBP, our two most recent programs differ in that they do not require a program director to find internships, they can be completed in four years and they are specific to the French program. As in the previous programs, students complete study in their professional discipline in French. Similar to our approach with the French and Pharmacy program, we identified an opportunity to create a new partnership when we learned that the Textiles Merchandising and Design (TMD) Department was seeking to develop partnerships with "fashion languages." TMD first began planning an interdisciplinary program with the Italian section of our Language Department. We presented French as a logical addition to the list of fashion languages. The marriage of French and TMD was just the first step. The next step was to formalize the partnership through the creation of an experiential-learning opportunity. After about three years of investigating avenues that ranged from attempting to create partnerships with French luxury fashion companies to starting a "fashion abroad" program with Université d'Angers, with none of these avenues leading to a satisfactory end, a local contact helped us connect with a small Parisian merchandising and marketing school, Mod'Spé, that had the flexibility, the high-quality professional education, and the internship connections we were looking for. It took two years of meetings and negotiation, but we signed an agreement with this school and we sent four students and received two during the first year of this exchange, 2012–13. The students spend the month of August in language-immersion study, they spend one year studying fashion merchandising and marketing classes in French and they do an internship in fashion merchandising or marketing over the summer. Mod'Spé, through its contacts, facilitates the placement of our students in internships.³

Another new collaboration is between French and Political Science. Contrary to all the other programs that we have established thus far, we set up the French experiential-learning opportunity before we approached Political Science with an offer of partnership. We knew we could do this because Political Science is a flexible thirty-credit major similar to the French major. A local contact put us in conversation with Institut d'Études Politiques de Rennes, otherwise known as Sciences-Po Rennes, and we saw immediately that they had much to offer our students majoring in French, Political Science, Economics, Management and other languages. Furthermore, they had a very responsive international relations office that was used to dealing with American demands. Within one year, we set up an agreement that allows our students to do a semester or year's worth of professional study, and also a summer internship with one of the organizations affiliated with Sciences-Po Rennes. Once the agreement was established, we invited the Director of the Office of International Relations at Sciences-Po Rennes to meet with the Political Science Department faculty, who were thrilled with this new opportunity

that resonated with their own vision to internationalize their education, and we have sent one student and received two in the academic year 2012–13.

The most important common thread to all of our cross-disciplinary programs thus far is that their success is rooted in three major factors: 1) the motivation by the departments at URI that partner with us to promote the cross-disciplinary program; 2) strategic and durable bilateral connections with relevant French academic institutions; and 3) a person dedicated to finding internships for students, either a URI advisor for the cross-disciplinary program (usually in exchange for a course-release) or a commitment from the partner institution to facilitate internship or experiential learning placement. A second common thread is that we had to overcome many obstacles, ranging from General Education requirements to tuition rates, in order to set up these programs.

There are indeed many obstacles to setting up cross-disciplinary programs. Programs like engineering, business, and pharmacy have stringent accreditation standards, reducing the flexibility of their curricula. There is less likelihood that courses taken abroad can be transferred back to the home institution. Cost of the program is frequently an issue. Major requirements are fixed and, often, so are the electives. Students sometimes have to fulfill two sets of general education classes.

For us, modifying the B.A.-B.S. general education requirements was both the biggest hurdle and an essential step toward facilitating students' completion of dual-degree programs. At URI this presented a formidable stumbling block because of a university requirement of 150 total credits rather than 120 when completing a dual degree. In the early 1990s, some university faculty initially worried about "watering down the degree" when the suggestion was made by language faculty in the College of Arts and Sciences to allow the completion of dual degrees, like double majors, within 120 credits. When a formal proposal was made before the Faculty Senate, however, it passed unanimously with the sentiment that the additional 30 credits were, in the end, arbitrary and standing in the way of internationalizing the university's overall curriculum. URI's dual degree of a B.S. in Business and a B.A. in a modern language had been available on paper for a number of years but had remained unattractive to students. Once the 150 credits impediment was removed, that program began to flourish and others became open to crafting other dual-degree programs (Morello).

Another stumbling block that we overcame early in the process of creating the bilateral programs was the wording of the university's major merit scholarship, the Centennial Scholarship, which demanded continuous enrollment at URI. At first, internships abroad were said to break that continuous enrollment. This major disincentive had to be rectified at the level of the university president, who clarified the wording to make it clear that students in international internships could maintain their merit scholarships (Grandin, Personal).

Many students worry about incurring debt while at the university and have to be mindful of increasing the cost of their degree(s). Finding ways to reduce the cost to students was yet another challenge. A positive development was a request made on behalf of international IEP students to allow them to extend their stay at URI beyond the term of their one-to-one exchange partner at regional tuition rather than out-of-state tuition. Once granted for the IEP, this strategy was extended to permit out-of-state URI students studying overseas to pay in-state tuition for bilateral exchange programs. Based on a National Student Exchange model, the policy now is in effect for any program that submits to a review of its merits by the Office of International Education. We do not believe that this fortuitous agreement is an essential component to the model's success, but is nevertheless a detail that helps as a motivational tool in maintaining the balance of the exchanges and creating equity of opportunity.

Every institution will have its own unique set of impediments. However, many obstacles can be overcome through the identification of personal connections and vested interests as well as by focusing on an initial program that serves as a model of emulation for subsequent programs. The development of sustainable cross-disciplinary programs is a slow and laborious process, but we have determined that it is ultimately the best long-term way to attract both university-wide support for French and student interest in the study of the language. We plan to continue developing cross-disciplinary programs in order to provide each of our French students with profession-specific study and experiential-learning opportunities in a Francophone country. While we are currently only able to offer this experience to students in business, engineering, pharmacy, fashion merchandising and marketing, and political science, we nevertheless encourage double-majoring in French and all other disciplines at URI. For the students for whom we do not yet have experiential learning possibilities, we promote language and general education study at our partner institutions, now also including Université de Rennes 2 and its Centre International Rennais d'Études du Français pour Étrangers (CIREFE).

Bilateral exchanges are a critical component of our cross-disciplinary programs because, contrary to traditional study-abroad programs, they allow our outgoing students to gain profession-specific language skills through specialized study and experiential learning at in-state tuition (which at URI is considerably lower than out-of-state tuition). In addition, they bring Francophone students into the university.

With regard to our outgoing students, when they go to study at one of our direct-exchange partners, they typically take classes entirely in French (our direct-exchange partners also usually provide language-support classes). If the students do not have the prerequisite language skills to be able to take classes taught entirely in French, we recommend that they do an immersion study first at one of our other partner institutions, either during the summer or during the fall semester, and then do their professional study in the spring semester. By the end of their

language and professional study, students are ready and confident enough to do an internship. When students return from this full year of language, professional study, and work experience, they find themselves more competitive on the job market and committed not just to the French major but to a life in which French will play an integral part. These students become ideal alumni because they are ready and willing to help market the French program.

At URI, the success of our direct-exchange programs has been helped by the administration's support of the exchanges at in-state tuition rates. Universities must absolutely make study abroad affordable. In-state tuition rates for study at direct-exchange partner institutions have made the option to spend a semester or year in France viable for many students who would not otherwise be able to afford international study, thereby reinforcing students' commitment to the French major, and after graduation, to the French program as a whole.

With regard to our incoming students: Generally speaking, whereas traditional study-abroad programs only send American students to France, bilateral agreements bring French-speaking students into the university, thereby reinforcing the presence of French and Francophone cultures at the university. These students are essential to the URI French program because they help us in three ways. First, they run our popular weekly conversation hour, "La Causerie." Second, we invite them regularly into our first- and second-year language classes as well as our conversation classes so that our students who have not yet been to France can interact authentically in French. Third, by their very presence in our classes and at our events, they help with recruiting for the major because they form friendships with our students who then become excited to study in France.

Our direct-exchange partners are thrilled that the URI French program produces students who have the requisite French skills to be able to take specialized classes in French. Frequently our partners bemoan the burden of creating discipline-specific programs in English for American universities. While some French institutions have found that they must do this in order to be able to send their students to the United States, it is costly to the school and also highlights the separation in our American educational system between language study and professional study.

An increasing number of French programs are now encouraging double- or triple-majoring and focusing intently on recruiting in order to increase enrollment in the French major.⁴ This is an essential first step to building a vibrant French program because a significant increase in numbers of majors often equals increased financing and institutional support. Let us consider for a moment the alternative: without a critical mass of majors, French programs face budget reductions, questions of irrelevance, and even extinction. Once a French program has avoided extinction by increasing enrollments, we believe the second step to creating a vibrant program is to shift the focus from growing the program in terms of numbers, to maintaining the program in terms of numbers of majors but also adding value. It was at this

shift that we first established the vision for the French program that focuses on expanding experiential-learning opportunities for students double-majoring in French.

While we have shifted our focus to building a strong program in terms of quality rather than quantity, we never lose sight of recruiting. Every semester we lead an aggressive recruiting campaign. However, even in our recruiting, we try to implement experiential learning. For example, a recent addition to our recruitment strategy is peer promotion, advisement, mentorship, and tutoring. Each semester we choose two "French Ambassadors" to help promote the French program and advise students. The responsibilities of the French Ambassadors include going to all of the 100-level French classes to talk about the French major as well as visiting strategically-chosen 100-level courses in our partner departments to present our cross-disciplinary programs. The French Ambassadors attend orientation events to advise and inform students who are considering the study of French. Also, the French Ambassadors organize events to energize students in the French program. These events include outings, film screenings, and special features at our weekly conversation hour. The Ambassadors gain organizing and mentoring experience through these activities with the French program. We also choose "French Course Coaches" to mentor and tutor 100-level students. These students serve as teaching assistants in the classroom and conduct tutoring hours outside of the classroom. Between the French Ambassadors' promotion of the French program and the French Course Coaches' mentoring and tutoring, students considering the French major find remarkable support, encouragement, and contagious enthusiasm. Furthermore, for a growing program with limited resources to market and recruit, the French Ambassadors and French Course Coaches prove themselves to be a boon.

While we have spent the bulk of this article articulating the importance of practical language skills to a student's education, we mean in no way to suggest that the future of French and Francophone studies depends upon the progressive eclipse of literature and film. On the contrary, we believe that programs that sacrifice the intellectual to the practical are doing a disservice to not only French and Francophone studies but also the humanities as a whole. As we mentioned, while students are on the URI campus, they develop basic language skills and then gradually transition to more humanities-based classes, generally literature and film. This focus on the humanities should not be jettisoned. Indeed, we find it essential that students be given the opportunity to use their French skills in their primary fields of study; however, we feel just as strongly that students use their French skills to engage in broad intellectual inquiry in the humanities. Students need to be introduced to French perspectives on the timeless questions to which the humanities respond (De Bruin).

The humanities situate students historically in larger social, cultural, political, philosophical, literary, and artistic contexts. They teach students the history of

ideas and give students frameworks through which they can challenge these ideas. The study of the humanities enables students to become deep thinkers, perceptive readers, effective communicators and, more importantly, active citizens. Admittedly, to a certain extent, the current emphasis on the so-called STEM disciplines is understandable. After all, state-sponsored education aims to prepare each generation for the demands of its society, and current economic exigencies stress the most immediately applicable skill set, which consequently makes the STEM disciplines seem to be the best investment of education dollars. But the narrow focus on the practical and the applicable prepares only for an immediate reality and not for a distant future. To focus solely on the practical would be a grave mistake, for this encourages a myopic instrumentalization of learning. The more panoramic addition of the intellectual gives students the ability to question what is given, to see beyond appearances, and to envision new configurations. Thus, a vibrant French program should aim to educate engaged global citizens capable of critical thinking no matter what their career interests may be. Happily, as a French program expands its cross-disciplinary frontiers, it brings humanities study to ever more students.

Daniel Pennac, reflecting on the role of education in students' lives and on his life as an educator, emphasizes the constant need to make education relevant: "Depuis Rabelais, chaque génération de Gargantua éprouve [...] un gros besoin de Ponocrates" (93). As humanists and language educators, we believe we have breathed new life into French, creating a program that is relevant to today's expectations and tomorrow's aspirations. Insofar as we provide for our students the professional experience that they need to go forth and build a successful career, we are working for contemporary expectations, both academic and professional. We agree with George Santayana that often "the great difficulty of education is to get experience out of ideas" (11) and that, for our students, working for professional goals in their second language can be immensely rewarding. We never lose sight, however, of the importance of our place in the humanities and role in humanity. Though our dual-degree and double-major students are often initially apprehensive of the study of literature, and to a lesser degree of film, the majority of our students finish the program with a great appreciation for the philosophical doors that great works of genius open in their minds. Combined with their international professional experiences, this background affords these undergraduates a rare opportunity to merge the "traditional and practical" as part of their own personal perspectives on the world. Our graduating-senior exit polls are proof that this "traditional and practical" approach that we have taken to building our French program works: 100% of the students in the class of 2012 said that if they had to do it all over, they would once again choose to major in French. The URI French undergraduate model: it works!

Notes

¹The practical is defined here as the ability to communicate about a broader range of topics, and the intellectual as the disciplined process of actively analyzing multiple facets of French and Francophone cultures and how they are linked together.

²"The program was able to evolve because of the clear engagement of key personalities who were eager to act when given the opportunity, and it certainly made a difference that one of us was a dean. Though I was more than ready and willing to commit my time to this effort, it would have been extremely difficult, if not impossible, in the early years [1980s] without the enthusiasm and support of the engineering dean" (Grandin, "Bridging" 325).

³See Hammadou Sullivan for comments from graduates in dual-degree programs with pharmacy, TMD, and engineering.

⁴Gudrais highlights Alain-Philippe Durand's early recruiting strategies at URI.

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