

Paris Program immerses students in French culture

By Jim H. Smith

“For close to a month and a half now, both high schoolers and university students have eschewed their classes in favor of protesting against the controversial proposed law... If this law is approved and enacted, it would mean that employers would have the right to fire their employees (only those under 26 years of age) within the first two years of their contract and without giving a reason.”

Commentary from a student reporter during the turbulent 1960s? Try again. It’s an excerpt from a dispatch by Trinity



student Juliet Izon ’07 to the College’s student newspaper, *The Trinity Tripod*. Izon, from University Park, Maryland, spent the spring semester of 2006 as a member of the first class at Trinity’s new Global Learning Site in Paris, and the student unrest in France turned out to be part of the learning experience for her.

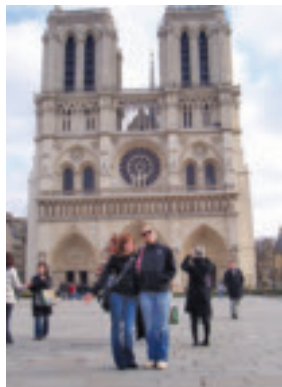
“In a lot of discussions that I’ve had with other Americans here, it seems to us that the student demonstrators and the plethora of strikes are a little out of control,” she wrote. “The general sentiment has been . . . if you do a good job, you won’t get fired. And if you’re not fired, you get (a contract that gives you more job security) and everybody lives happily ever after.

“Yet, I am aware that that is a very American way to look at the problem. If I had grown up with the assurance of job protection and was about to have the rug swept out from under me, I might be pretty upset as well.”

That Izon’s view of both countries was tested by the experience is precisely as it should be. “The minute students arrive in France they begin to experience the many striking differences that distinguish France from the United States,” says Associate Professor Andrew Gold, who will teach a course in Paris this fall. “In the United States, airports are fragmented facilities, housing myriad terminals for individual airlines. In France the airport is a large government facility. In France you get free luggage carts. At JFK, you must pay for them”

Gold’s course—“Franco-American Challenges”—is designed to exploit such differences and is an opportunity for students to test their values and perceptions as they explore the two nation’s cultures comparatively. “Americans tend to take America for granted,” he says. “My course, and indeed the entire Paris program, affords students an opportunity to take a hard look at that. In fact,

the United States has had a love-hate relationship with France, starting from their respective revolutions. Perhaps it is because both countries see themselves as providing a beacon to the rest of the world by offering two quite different models of democracy—dynamic individualism versus communal welfareism.”



Saturation in French culture

The Paris program is different from other Trinity programs abroad in several important respects. “We began thinking about this program four years ago,” says Professor Alden Gordon, chair of the Fine Arts Department and director of the Trinity College Paris program. “We wanted to genuinely prepare students, while they were in Hartford, for a meaningful global experience. And once they went abroad, we wanted to ensure that the global experience would be ‘real,’ that they would have direct experience of a foreign culture, but within the context of a coherent academic program.”

To effectively prepare students for their experience abroad, says Gordon, it’s essential to identify those who wish to participate as early as possible. One of the gateways to the program has been a first-year seminar called “Paris” that Gordon taught last fall for the first time. He expects a quarter to a third of the 14 students who participated in the seminar to eventually go to Paris for a semester.



“In the past, students who wanted to study in Paris had to enroll in an affiliated program and receive transfer credits. With the new Paris program, however, Trinity actually conducts the courses and hires the faculty. Students earn credits directly, just as if they were at Trinity.

“Also, students live in the city, either in an apartment or with a French family. The point is to give them greater saturation in French culture. Students should do things in Paris that they can only do in France, or do best in France. You can, for instance, study art history better in Paris than you can in Hartford.”

To enhance their ability to quickly acclimate to French culture, all students are assigned French peers with whom they meet regularly. The relationship is expected to be culturally expanding for both parties.

Two on-site coordinators—Francie Plough Seder ’80 and Susan Taylor-Leduc ’81—have also been hired to ensure continuity. Both are Trinity alumnae. Seder holds a master’s degree in French from



Middlebury College and has lived for 15 years in Paris, where she has taught both individuals and groups in French and English. Taylor-Leduc earned her M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in art history from the University of Pennsylvania and has taught extensively in France.

In addition to their course work, the Paris program offers students exceptional opportunities to take advantage of a host of French cultural sites. Students in the spring semester were able to explore the Loire Valley on one trip, as part of a course called “Paris Through Art and Architecture.” As part of another course, “Discovering Europe and France,” they traveled to Brussels. This autumn, when Professor Dori Katz teaches “France During the Occupation” at the Paris campus, students will visit Normandy and the site of the D-Day invasion.

Living and learning in the City of Light

Fourteen students enrolled in the new program’s inaugural semester. There are 16 this fall—13 from Trinity and three from the University of Virginia—and Gordon expects more than 20 in the spring of 2007. The students represent a wide range of disciplines.

Izon, for instance, is an English major who enrolled because she wanted to expand her French-language skills and wanted to have the kind of intimate learning experience a class of 14 students could provide. “I think being abroad makes you more independent, from learning how to take the Metro to struggling every day with a language that’s not your mother tongue. I have also been lucky enough to travel to quite a few countries and have really enjoyed seeing how other cultures function firsthand.”

Ian Rahilly ’07, from Toronto, is a public policy and law major who says that while

the Paris experience was not specifically connected to his major, he wanted to improve his French-language skills (“As a Canadian, it can be very helpful career-wise to be bilingual.”) and he also wanted the concentrated experience of living and learning in “the City of Light.”

“No student should pass up the opportunity to live in Paris,” he says. “Paris provides an endless array of the most amazing sights, museums, sounds, and smells—all completely different from anything you can find in North America. The program was wonderful and the experience truly memorable.”



International programs at Trinity

The College has its own Rome Campus and eight Global Learning Sites. Global Learning Sites are Trinity-sponsored study abroad programs that are overseen by Trinity faculty and include a community-learning component. The College currently has sites in Barcelona, Cape Town, Istanbul, Paris, Moscow, Santiago, Trinidad, and Vienna. Trinity also has programs in Shanghai and Cordoba, and offers exchange programs in Germany and Hong Kong. Students may also study on approved non-Trinity programs throughout the world. To learn more about these programs, please visit the Trinity Web site at www.trincoll.edu/Academics/StudyAway/OIP.htm.