

# ***Preparing U.S. Students for European Teaching Styles***

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# FRENCH EDUCATION OR THE SCHOOL OF HARD KNOCKS

*Loren Ringer*

THE NEW SCHOOL

**PARSONS  
PARIS**

# French Education

*« On ne valorise pas la réussite, on stigmatise l'échec. »*

“One doesn't over-emphasize success but rather one stigmatizes failure.”

# Brief explanation of French Education system:

- *Le bac*, or HS diploma is a national standardized test – more specialized than in US – one of only two countries in the world to have philosophy in the curriculum. Average of 12% fail and have to take senior year over.
- No entrance exam to university – HS diploma is sufficient
- Very low cost – while anyone can attend, there's a nearly 50% attrition rate after the first year
- Freshmen choose majors immediately; have a fixed set of courses to take with very few electives

# Brief explanation of French Education system (continued)

- More formal, hierarchical relationship between professors and students
- The majority of courses delivered lecture style – students are excellent note takers
- Even classes labeled ‘discussion sections’ offer little dialogue with students
- Formal oral presentations are often the only time a student interacts with the instructor and peers

# Brief explanation of French Education system (continued)

- Grades are weighted heavily on exams; very little continuous assessment
- Syllabus or what they call the '*programme*' (if one is offered at all) is short and usually a list of topics treated, the books to be read and a short bibliography
- Assignments: if a book is on the syllabus, it's expected for students to read the entire book early in the semester and be ready at any time to discuss it

# Brief explanation of French Education system (continued)

- Originality or creativity plays, in general, a much smaller role; instead, students follow templates and guidelines
- France is known for having specific writing assignments: *explication de texte, commentaire composé & dissertation*. Students learn the rules and apply them meticulously
- In French as a second language (FLE), more emphasis placed on grammar and writing; as a result, American students tend to place lower than they expect on placement exams

# Teacher's responsibility toward students in France:

- Considered an expert in the field and there to impart knowledge
- Ethic responsibility to the university
- Moral responsibility to the intellectual community of his/her field
- Mentoring and advising but only at graduate level

# What is NOT the teacher's responsibility in France:

- To entertain students
- To cajole students into learning
- Student attendance (even though in discussions, the teacher will do role call)
- The students' success (beyond giving good, coherent lectures)
- Fostering student participation

# Qualities of a model French student

- Autonomous
- Self-motivated, clear sense of purpose
- Self-disciplined, including the ability to manage one's time
- Good note-taker and very attentive in class
- Respectful in class (*bien élevé*)
- Punctual

# Qualities of a model French student (continued)

- Positive self-esteem, not feeling overly criticized when a professor makes a correction
- Good sense of humor and ability to accept failure
- *Débouillard*: term refers to people who are proactive and use inner resources to find solutions without depending too heavily on others
- Able to get to know other students, forming study groups and asking to share notes if necessary

# Obstacles for US students

- Class schedules are only posted a few days before classes begin (French students have little choice)
- Lack of syllabus – makes it difficult to “course shop” but also to establish equivalencies
- No classroom discussion – US students find it hard when they can’t engage with the instructor – some report a tendency to ‘zone out’

# Obstacles for US students (continued)

- The idea of detailed note-taking and ‘regurgitating’ on tests is off-putting to most US students
- In French language classes, French instructors complain about the “intuitive” method of writing rather than trying to integrate the model / template being taught
- Detailed syllabi in the US give students a sense of security in knowing what is expected of them and also establishing a work flow for the semester

# Obstacles for US students (continued)

- US students like to be challenged and view that as one of the instructor's primary roles
- Students appreciate continuous assessment and like to know their grade throughout the semester
- Rate professors on how engaging they are with the topic and their ability to help students engage



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# SPANISH EDUCATION, OR THE “LAID BACK” SYSTEM

# Brief explanation of the Spanish educational system (the framework)

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- No High School standardized test
- Examen de Selectividad*
- Public university - relative low cost
- Degrees and electives



# Brief explanation of the Spanish educational system (teaching style)

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More informal/laid back, less structure (class and course)

From lecture style towards greater interaction

More formal/distant relationship between teacher and students



# Course planning and assessment

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Brief syllabus

Grade weighted on exams, with some continuous assessment

No grade inflation



# Teachers' responsibilities and view of their profession

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An expert in the field, who imparts knowledge

Responsible to the university and the intellectual community

Limited mentoring and advising



# Spanish students

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Autonomous

Laid back

Collaborative

Motivated?



# Main perceived obstacles ... and what they do to prepare

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- Different language = Review/study Spanish intensively
- Different academic culture (assessment methods, teaching style)  
= Attend school and program abroad pre-departure orientation



# Unexpected challenges

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Background: lack of background knowledge of Spanish history and culture, lack of knowledge of the campus and its dynamics

Teaching style: less structure in general, not so student-centered

Assessment style: unclear expectations, little feedback, heavily weighted on final exams, lower grades

Cultural: adjusting to cultural norms and classroom etiquette

Social: not knowing anyone, being the only American in class

# Preparing students to succeed in a different system

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The meaning of success

Pre-departure stage

During the program

After the program has ended





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STUDY ABROAD

# ENCOUNTERING THE 'OTHER' IN EDUCATION

US student challenges in GB / IRE direct enroll institutions

Ray Casserly, Director, Global Institute – London

# Student Cohorts within UK and Ireland

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- **State exams determine entry in IRE for majority**
- **State exams play significant (but not exclusive) role in UK**
- **Previous course requirements in most 'specialist' courses (e.g. STEM)**
- **Students choose degree pathway at application**
- **Students remain largely within familiar cohort throughout**
- **Ideally, the UK and Irish student should be...**
  - Autonomous, strong sense of initiative, proactive, self motivated
  - An ability to take direct (and rarely positive) feedback
  - An excellent note-taker, able to apply nuances of lectures into assignments (without regurgitating)
  - Respectful in class towards the lecturer & fellow students
  - Able to collaborate with others

# The Lecturer

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- **Significant focus of their position for research funding, publications, and impact**
- **Mentoring and advising typically at PhD student / candidate level due to funding streams**
- **Office hour(s) are frequently compulsory, but not often enforced by school / institute**
- **Focused on university goals for REF results**
- **It's not typical for a lecturer to strive to...**
  - To engage students in learning as autonomy is expected
  - Monitor Student attendance (exception of tutorials and international students on tier 4 visas)

# The Course / Module

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- **mid-term assignment and exams (roughly 70/30 % split)**
- **Strict requirement to remain with university policies**
- **Reading: students expected to read a lot, often as ‘full time students’ (approx. 35-40 hour week).**
- **Grading: marking scales, including conceptual equivalency, often determined at the university level.**
- **Grading: students in the UK are accustomed to receiving second class honours grades (‘B’ and ‘C’ grades**
- **Grading: lecturers will not regrade papers through semester. Exam Boards review**
- **Extenuating Circumstances: lecturers rarely have authority to offer extensions to individual students, as students must apply through formal channels based in the school/institute or university.**

# US Student Support

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- **OPDO / arrival orientation to address these issues and expectations**
  - Present grading scales / conceptual equivalency examples
  - Direct feedback & examples, where possible, from previous students
- **Regular, one-to-one meetings with students early, mid-way, and near end of semester to discuss workload**
  - Red flags: “it’s easier than I thought”, or “I don’t have much work”
  - ‘one shot’ essay opportunity
- **Provide workshops throughout (essay writing, workload management)**
  - Encourage and facilitate peer support
  - Encourage the ‘little a lot’ approach

# Preparing U.S. Students for European Teaching Styles

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THE UNIVERSITY  
*of* NORTH CAROLINA  
*at* CHAPEL HILL

# What do students who have taken courses at a university say on their post program evaluations?

## ITALY

- “The professors seemed uninterested in the material that they were teaching at lectures and openly stated that attending classes was not going to necessarily be helpful in passing or excelling in the course. In addition, there were little to no graded assignments throughout the semester which made it extremely difficult to gauge how well you were doing in each class.”
- “The style of teaching and way things are presented are much different.”
- “I wish I had known a little bit more about the Italian culture, how they interacted with foreigners, and how the institution of which I would be attending provided their academics to their students.”

# GERMANY

- “German universities are different from U.S. universities, so it is difficult to compare the two. I took courses at the language institute, as well as normal university classes. The normal university classes I took were American Studies seminars, so they were in English. For these classes, almost all of your grade is based on the final, which may be an exam (oral or written) or a paper, and there is not much work throughout the semester.”
- “There was very little help when it came to the time to pick classes. There is no guide to help you decide which classes would be best, and there is no academic advising to help you choose; the course selection process is very confusing and the website is not very user friendly.”
- “The educational system is very good but also very different to the American. You will also be able to experience more if you are at a C1 level and can take classes in your (non-german) major! It requires a lot of self-motivation, reading, and preparation for a big written exam (Klausur) or a long written paper (Hausarbeit) at the end and a presentation (Referat) during the semester.”

# FRANCE

- “As an exchange student, I was simply not expected to complete as much work as the French students.”
- “Feel free to take anything you want, but be wary of literature courses unless they're absolutely obligatory for you. I took two lit. courses to complete my surveys and the final exams were brutal. You will have a one question exam that can be on any minute detail you've learned in the semester, and that one essay prompt is your only grade for the whole course.”
- “Professors who, simply put, just could not be bothered to actually teach.”
- “At XXX, I think that the amount of disseminated information was comparable to that at UNC, but the mode of evaluation was more memorization-based than application-based, which I think indicates an expectation for a lower level of understanding.”
- “The lack of organization by the university where we studied. They didn't have anything organized and there was basically no set structure for signing up for classes. Overall a very frustrating process in the beginning but fine once you are registered.”

- “The course registration/approval process at the FAC was extremely frustrating, unorganized, and difficult overall.”
- “I can't say that taking courses through the French University was an extremely pleasant experience. I know I am somewhat privileged with the American system, but I felt there was not very much guidance in this respect. Especially as the system is pretty difficult to navigate, I felt sort of lost at times in terms of what I should take.”
- “The academics are very demanding and rigorous however the way they are taught with only having class once a week makes them difficult to retain information since there is not very much reinforcement.”
- “XXX doesn't function well in terms of administration. You will not always have perfect information and doing anything through the university is complicated. Sometimes teachers will post information on Moodle, through e-mail, on the department's bulletin board, or on the department's blog. But you never never know which one, so you have to check them all. Also, in Europe in general, your grade rests more on one (or two if you are lucky) assignments. I had several classes where my only grade was the final.”

## Encouraging evaluations

- “I would recommend to take any University of XX (Spain) course because it is a good way to learn more about Spanish culture and how they do things differently than us, but I would warn any students that although the class may not have a lot of work, the final exam is sometimes the only grade so a good amount of preparation has to go into studying for the exam.”
- “I learned a lot about the difference between the academic programs both within Spain (public vs. private) but also in comparison with the U.S.. As much as I did learn from these classes, I almost found it more interesting/valuable to learn about the difference in education systems.”
- “The German University System is vastly different from that of the US, as it places most of the responsibility for learning material on the student. This allows for a great deal of freedom, but also liability.”

For years the British  
have been telling us that  
we drive on the wrong  
side of the street!

# Difficulties U.S. students are having integrating European Universities

## 1. Understanding a different educational system

What is the US educational system like? (handout)

Compare with what we have just heard.

For the most part, when U.S. students go abroad, they assume that their educational experience will be the same; some have heard that there are differences but they still have their expectations and the question today is how to counter their assumptions and help change their expectations.

## 2. They have different expectations in many areas:

- what the classroom will be like
- what the teacher will be like
- what the teaching style will be
- what the course expectations will be
- what the assessment will be
- what the outcome will be/grades
- customer service expectations in International Offices

3. Additionally, many of you have to deal with....

What are the expectations of the home and host institutions?

Teaching more according to US style?

Grade inflation? Should European professors be more lenient with international students?

Is it helping the students to achieve immersion and integration?

How to deal with that and maintain the historical integrity of institution's (country's) Educational system, and educational strategies?

Pre-departure and On Site Orientations: some examples of current activities

Predeparture: mix of advisor and returning student sharing with students

On Site: one on one advising as students register for university courses

Role of the home and host institutions in preparing the students

YOUR TURN!

(Break out in groups; please have a mix of European and US staff/University personnel) We want your thoughts and ideas!

What type of preparation is needed?

If you are doing something on your campus/center, please share

Who should do it?

How and where should it be done?

Is this a shared responsibility?

We will write down some of your ideas so we can all take away something!

THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR ATTENDING THIS SESSION AND FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION

Loren, Magda, Ray and Lynn