Study-Abroad Program Proposal Narrative­–Paris/Versailles 2024

"Écologie et Émerveillement:

A French Immersion Journey in Language, Literature, Culture, and Global Sustainability"

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WARRANT FOR THE PROGRAM

“I came to study in Paris, not Inferno,” exclaimed a student recently during a summer study-abroad program in the French capital. His statement was followed by a loaded question: “Why don’t the French use air conditioning?” As reported by [*The* *Washington Post*](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2019/06/28/europes-record-heatwave-is-changing-stubborn-minds-about-value-air-conditioning/)in 2019, fewer than five percent of European households have air-conditioning compared with 90 percent in the U.S. Obviously, the French and their European counterparts have had practically no need for it until annual heatwaves. And even more obvious, this climate phenomenon extends well beyond the continent’s borders. Globally, the seven hottest years recorded were the last seven, while last year (2022) was Europe’s hottest, according to [Copernicus](https://climate.copernicus.eu/copernicus-globally-seven-hottest-years-record-were-last-seven), the European climate change monitoring service. Before summer arrived this year (2023), France experienced yet another heatwave. Between exposure to heat waves, large concrete-filled urban areas, overcrowded public transportation, and an absence of air conditioning, study-abroad programs can provide an environmental reminder or wake-up call to students. Growing consciously aware of climate change is yet another benefit of studying abroad today.

While one might look at students’ and faculty directors’ physical discomfort in this positive light, a widespread case of eco-anxiety among college students remains a serious concern. Many have expressed both angst about the future and a sense of helplessness. There seems to be no way to prevent climate chaos and environmental and agricultural degradation, as these issues are in the hands of short-sided and corrupt politicians or big businesses driven by greed.

A sense of eco-anxiety is aggravated even more by a staggering realization about the state of college education. There is often a disparity between the reality of climate change, environmental and agricultural deterioration, and students’ degree plans. There are STEM, writing, culture, and perhaps even foreign language requirements. All are designed to foster open-mindedness, not to mention employment opportunities. But what about explicit measures colleges and universities can take to stimulate conscious awareness about the state of the environment? Shouldn’t they also prepare students systematically for a future that will require lifestyle changes and career expertise to respond to a new climate and social reality?

Whereas Lee Gardner provides a synthesis of how higher education has been affected by climate change­ in *The Chronicle of Higher Education’s* booklet *The Environmentally Resilient Campus: How colleges are adapting to the inevitability of climate change* (2022), he fails to elaborate on how to promote resilience among students. The booklet emphasizes instead crises on campuses, such as fires and flooding, and neglects to consider collective measures spearheaded by students to fend off catastrophes.

The following describes our vision of a 2024 study-abroad program to Paris/Versailles that promotes not only acquisition of the French language, literature, and culture, but also mechanisms to build resilience among students to respond to present and future environmental catastrophes. Indeed, study abroad programs are an excellent setting to initiate modifications to college learning methods and objectives, precisely because those who participate in them are often eager to view themselves anew and transform the world.

LOGISTICAL DETAILS OF THE PROGRAM

**When** will our 2024 study-abroad program take place? It will consist of a three-week stay in the French capital (Sunday, June 9–Sunday, June 30). **Where** will we stay? We will reside in a dormitory with a community kitchen and classrooms in Paris or Versailles (a Paris suburb). **What** are the organizational pillars of the program? There are three academic components: French language courses; French Culture courses; and an applied humanities project that include an environmental student convention. Khalid Aada will teach two language courses: FREN 1312 and a combined FREN 2311/FREN 3321; Suzanne LaLonde will teach one French Culture and Literature combined class: FREN 2382/FREN 4339. **How** will instruction take place? The first two weeks will consist of intense language and culture pedagogy, including excursions to points of interest. The culture/literature course will focus on French revolutionary ideas and movements (loosely defined) on display in cultural objects, so that students can apply historical lessons to the present ecological crisis. During the third week, they will participate in a student environmental convention (“The Paris Accord 2.0”), initiated by Suzanne LaLonde and Khalid Aada and colleagues at the University of Paris and possibly UNESCO. (Last year, Suzanne and her former students were invited to participate in the International Student Citizen Assembly Convention on the Environment in Paris, sponsored by the University of Paris. She has also initiated student internships at UNESCO in Paris in the past.) The convention will consist of: a) talks delivered by both faculty and students from across the globe (who attend or work at UTRGV and/or at the University of Paris); b) round-table discussions; and c) brain-storming activities. The conference goals are four-fold: 1) to raise consciousness about environmental crises from multicultural perspectives; 2) to cultivate concrete student initiatives to address these crises; 3) to encourage cross-cultural understanding and cooperation among students and faculty; and 4) to cultivate resilience to address the environmental challenges by building student confidence–as they learn about the history of revolutionary ideas–and by encouraging camaraderie. In short, UTRGV students will serve as “eco-ambassadors” in Paris. To that end, they will also be invited before departure to donate to organizations (Atmosfair) to offset their air travel and educate peers about environmentally sustainable measures.

THE BIGGER PICTURE OF THE PROGRAM

In a time when international governing bodies and some national legislators are neglecting to address seriously environmental and agricultural crises, it remains an ethical imperative for college administrators, staff, faculty, and most importantly, students to engage in international and cooperative efforts to address climate change. And in an era when state legislators are slashing humanities programs, it is incumbent upon faculty and administrators to develop academic programs that encourage an immediate application of curricula in the arts, languages, and literature to real life problems. While detractors might argue that this proposed study-abroad program is too short to impact students’ lives and/or that students have neither the time nor the interest to play active roles in these issues, universities should help them to make not only the time to address these topics, but also to cultivate resilience to engage in and even lead a global environmental movement. If the Peace Corps was developed in part to respond to the existential threats of the Cold War, an “Eco Corps”, piloted by student “ecological ambassadors” from UTRGV and beyond, may translate into a much-needed mechanism to abate eco-anxiety about a precarious future.