

# Recasting the Foreign Language Requirement Through Study Abroad: A Cultural Immersion Program in Avignon

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**Abstract:** *Given the decline in French majors and enrollments in French junior year study abroad programs, educators have increasingly turned to short-term study abroad for first- and second-year students. These programs can motivate students fulfilling the language requirement, while also internationalizing the curriculum through interdisciplinary and experiential learning in a foreign environment. This article examines a pilot program in which study abroad in Avignon, France, was an integral part of a third-semester course. Student evaluations were overwhelmingly positive. Many students subsequently continued with French, applied for the junior year Paris program, and found innovative ways to integrate language and study in other disciplines. Drawing on this experience, this article addresses the value of such programs to foreign language curricular development and to the internationalization of the liberal arts curriculum generally.*

**Key words:** *experiential learning, foreign language immersion, foreign language requirement, interdisciplinary, internationalization, study abroad*

**Language:** *French*

## Introduction

The junior year study abroad experience has often been a centerpiece in the modern language department curriculum for majors. It has served as both the reward for long years of preparation, and as foundation for the highest level courses in literature and civilization. In recent years, participation in short-term study abroad programs has increased (Wheeler, 2000). However, these programs have not been well integrated within the curricula of foreign language instruction, as departments have generally remained wedded to the earlier advanced-learner and longer term model. Well-conceived short-term programs can stimulate new interest in language study precisely when it is needed most—at the end of the coursework required to complete a college's language requirement. An excellent example is the program in Costa Rica described by Gorka and Niesenbaum (2001). Through projects linking the study of the natural environment with study of the language and culture of the area, the Costa Rica program was able to engage non-language majors from a variety of disciplines in a language-intensive study abroad curriculum. Such programs offer a unique opportunity for internationalizing the curriculum as a whole through interdisciplinary programs centered on experiential learning in a foreign cultural environment.

This article examines a pilot study abroad program in Avignon, France, in January 2002. The program was an integral part<sup>1</sup> of a special section of a 4-credit third-semester French course—the last one needed to complete the college's language requirement (three 4-credit semester-long courses or equivalent proficiency). The class included two parts: a 7-week component on campus during which students met four times a week for 50 minute sessions, and the

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3-week study abroad component during which students met six times a week for 2-hour sessions. In addition to the usual French 130 content, there were also several guest lecturers and excursions in Avignon.

Student evaluations of the course were overwhelmingly positive, in contrast to the lower scores this third-semester course often receives. Eight of the 17 Avignon students enrolled in language courses upon their return and several attended the junior year program in Paris, swelling the enrollments for that program to more than twice the number of the previous year. Back on campus, students found innovative ways to integrate language study within their majors, and to strengthen the international dimension of their education as a whole. Through consideration of this program's experience and promise, this article argues for the value of short-term study abroad to foreign language curricular development and to the internationalization of the liberal arts curriculum.

### Motivating Students to Meet the Language Requirement

The need for greater knowledge of the language and culture of other countries is more acute in the United States today than ever before. Unfortunately, it seems that while students value the long-range goal of linguistic competency, they are frequently unmotivated in the elementary language courses constituting the college language requirement. Many come to feel that this requirement is an obstacle to serious study in their majors.

Recent scholarship on foreign language instruction in American higher education offers one important explanation for this perception: the lack of fit between what our colleges offer and the needs of our students. Brecht and Walton's (1995) taxonomy of four primary missions for university-level language study has been a useful starting point for discussion of areas of disjuncture. These four missions are: (a) *general education*: broader cultural awareness based on competency in a foreign language; (b) *heritage*: development of a language first learned at home; (c) *applied*: preparation for professional or personal use of a language; and (d) *specialist*: preparation for a career as a language teacher, linguist, or translator.

Brecht and Ingold (2000) offered a succinct summary of the findings of the Language Mission Project study (Maxwell, Johnson, & Spalding, 1999). They noted that while students express most interest in the applied mission and increasingly, the heritage mission, "institutional rhetoric and most of its instructional resources focus on a variously defined general education mission; while faculty interest and curriculum design dwell on the specialist mission."<sup>2</sup> (Brecht & Ingold, 2000, p. 33)

Whereas colleges focus on the value of these elementary level courses in fostering the "broader cultural awareness" of the general education mission, students often hope

that at the end of the language requirement they will be able to use the language in personal or professional contexts. For language faculty, these courses are often valued because they prepare students for the advanced proficiency of the specialist mission.

Maxwell and Garrett (2002) stated that the result of these "systemic disjunctures" is that many institutions adopt a "one-size-fits-all" approach, in which all students are in the same language track regardless of their learning backgrounds or goals." For Maxwell and Garrett, this "constitutes the most important reason institutional efforts fail to address the lack of student interest in language study" (p. 25).

While these analysts agree on the primary cause of students' poor motivation, there are serious differences among them about the implications of recent research for the future of collegewide language requirements.

Maxwell and Garrett (2002) argued that colleges should examine the extent to which they are able to meet each of the four missions, and if necessary, make difficult decisions about focus and priorities. They questioned the overall value of the language requirement, stating that "there may be more meaningful ways to address the general education mission than requiring two to three semesters of elementary language study" (p. 25).

In contrast, Brecht and Ingold (2000) argued that it is necessary to reexamine the general education mission and they emphasized the importance of language skills to further cross-cultural understanding and communication. They proposed the term *linguacy*<sup>3</sup> to characterize "an appreciation and respect, borne of experience and reflection, for the richness and variety of the world's languages and cultures, and a set of competencies in dealing with those languages and cultures" (pp. 31–32). They noted that the varied terminology associated with the general education mission (including global, cross-cultural, or international awareness) mostly skirt around language proficiency as foundational. In contrast, the term *linguacy* "has as a first and necessary component a true working ability in one or more natural languages in addition to one's own" (p. 35).

Such studies raise crucial questions for the future of college language requirements. Addressing student disinterest in language study, they propose two different solutions. The first involves moving away from an insistence on elementary-level language study for all students as a means of achieving broader cultural awareness. The second involves a greater emphasis on language skills as a singular medium for achieving such awareness. Is it possible to recast language requirement programs so that they meet the needs and desires of students, faculty, and administrators? The argument here is that short-term, language-centered study abroad programs offer one means of doing so. By helping students achieve greater linguistic and cultural competency during study abroad,

the Avignon program shows how colleges might fulfill a general education mission in a way consonant with the concept of linguacy.

With proper planning, short-term intensive programs can provide students with greater intercultural awareness through foreign language study. They can prepare students to develop the expertise needed for graduate study. They can deepen the oral proficiency skills students cite as a key reason for their interest in foreign languages. They can also be structured to meet the diverse backgrounds and needs of all students (including heritage learners and non-language majors). Most importantly, they can motivate students to pursue further language study and travel abroad, and perhaps, to increase the demand and use for foreign language skills in our society.<sup>4</sup> As Gorka and Niesenbaum (2001) noted, “Our hope is that as more programs of this sort are created, we will instill new attitudes toward language study and cultural awareness” (pp. 108–109).

### Creation of the French 130 in Avignon Pilot Program

The Avignon pilot program was the fruit of collaboration between faculty and administrators at the author’s institution, a private four-year liberal arts college of approximately 1,300 students.<sup>5</sup> The goal was to provide students with an overseas experience as early as possible so that this experience could shape the rest of their education. The Avignon pilot was intended to be the first of a broader set of “language, history, and culture” programs in other countries. In all, four language intensive courses (in Granada, Berlin, Cuernavaca, and Moscow) were added following review of the pilot program, and the Avignon program has been taught twice since the pilot. To fund the Avignon pilot, the Director of International Studies solicited a grant from the President of the college. Students paid \$300.<sup>6</sup> Funding was built into the operating budget of the International Studies office for the Avignon pilot program, and for all three programs the next year. The defining feature of these language immersion courses, and the reason why they initially received greater funding than the college’s other study abroad programs, was their role in fulfilling the collegewide foreign language requirement.

At the time, members of the French faculty were redesigning the French 130 course. Evaluations for 130 (last in the required three-semester series for the language requirement) were routinely lower than those for other 100- and 200-level courses. An additional goal was to motivate more students to pursue language study beyond the 130 level. From course evaluations and discussions with students and other teachers, the French faculty redesigning 130 drew the following conclusions:

1. Classroom learning was perceived as too abstract. Students were unable to link classwork with the concrete particulars of the written and spoken language.

2. Knowledge about cultural difference remained too intellectual, in stark contrast to the experiential learning of students returning from study abroad.
3. Students did not see the practical benefits of learning a second language (L2) and were unable to integrate language study with coursework in other disciplines.
4. Students lacked confidence in their language skills and were disappointed at not being fluent at the end of the required courses.

The last conclusion was considered particularly important. The French section believed that practice in a language-immersion setting could help students consolidate their skills through practice and see how much they had learned. This was deemed especially important for French 130 students as they considered whether or not (and how) to continue language study in the future. At this stage, students’ dissatisfaction with their language skills can discourage them from taking any further courses, as Gorka and Niesenbaum (2001) noted in describing their students’ disappointment.

When they see that they are far from fluent at the end of the requirement, they deem the experience a waste of time and pass on negative impressions of language learning to their peers, faculty advisors, and parents. As time passes and they forget more of their foreign language skills, having studied a foreign language seems increasingly irrelevant to their overall college experience (see Krueger 1993). (p. 107).

A further frustration for the French faculty was that many students returned to language study as juniors or seniors, often after traveling overseas and fulfilling the basic requirements of their majors. Unfortunately, in the interim they had missed out on valuable opportunities for making their language courses and their studies in their major mutually beneficial.

The Avignon pilot program addressed these issues by making a 3-week study abroad experience in France an integral part of one section of the third-semester 4-credit course. In this way, a cultural and linguistic immersion experience was incorporated within the language requirement and was intended to encourage further language study. The goal was to make the process of learning about language and culture less abstract by helping students realize their language skills in practice in an immersion setting. Further, by linking the study abroad component closely with on-campus instruction, French faculty sought to promote what Hanratty (2001) called “full-circle learning”—the preparation and later consolidation of the study abroad experience on campus.

### Overview of the Avignon Pilot Program

Participants in the Avignon pilot program included 17 students and 2 French faculty members. Eighteen students

were accepted after submitting a short essay describing their motivation for participating and after an interview with French faculty and International Studies office staff; one student subsequently withdrew. After 7 weeks of class during fall semester on campus, the group traveled to Avignon in January. There, students attended 2-hour classes every morning (except for Sundays). In the afternoon, guest speakers (two of them faculty at the University of Avignon) contributed two lectures each. Since the pilot year, other speakers have included a theatre director who led a *commedia dell'arte* workshop in preparation for a play the students saw, the leader of an association devoted to Avignon's gypsy community, and a photographer who gave a workshop and helped students with digital photography projects. Exams were devoted to grammar and vocabulary similar to the on-campus ones. Each student also pursued an independent study project and kept a journal devoted to cultural differences between France and the United States. The trip also included a 4-day stay in the small town of Taulignan, where students participated in a broad range of activities including tours of Roman ruins, a meeting with the Assistant Mayor, a visit to the truffle market of Richerenches, and a truffle-hunting trip.

### **Designing Study Abroad Programs: Administration and Logistics**

Organizing short-term study abroad programs involves resolving a broad range of administrative, logistical, and curricular issues. The way such issues are addressed varies considerably from one institution to another. This section describes how these concerns were addressed in the Avignon pilot program, and how the organization of the program has evolved since then.

#### *Administration*

Key administrative concerns included how credits are assigned, how faculty are compensated, and what (if any) special funding is available for students. In the Avignon pilot program, students earned 4 credits for both the 7-week component on campus (4 weekly 50-minute sessions) and the 3-week component abroad. In all other French 100-level courses (including the other 130 sections), students received 4 credits for 15 weeks of four weekly 50-minute sessions. To enroll in any 130 section, students must have already completed the two semesters of French 110 and 120 (earning at least a C- in each course), or demonstrate comparable proficiency on a placement test.

A related issue is faculty compensation. The Avignon program includes two instructors. In the pilot program, the "lead" instructor taught the classes prior to study abroad, then traveled to France to organize and oversee program activities. The second instructor joined the group for the overseas component and taught courses there. The college has a "3 and 3" teaching load (i.e., faculty are responsible

for teaching three 3- or 4-credit courses each semester). The lead instructor has received a course release, meaning that he has taught two courses in the fall (including the pre-Avignon component), led the Avignon program in January, and then taught three courses in the spring. The second instructor has been paid for a course overload while teaching three courses in the fall, teaching classes in Avignon, and then three courses on campus in the spring.

Following the pilot program, it was decided that students should be awarded 5 credits for the Avignon program. While students needed to earn more credits than other students completing the language requirement, this was an optional section of French. Students could still choose a 4-credit on-campus section of 130.<sup>7</sup>

During the first two years of the Avignon program, the President of the college provided special funding for it so that students paid only \$300 to participate the first year, and \$500 the second year. In part because many other (equally deserving) new programs were created since the Avignon pilot, this funding was no longer available in the third year. But students were able to apply for both need- and merit-based financial aid. Most students received between \$300 and \$850 toward the per-student cost of \$2,000 from scholarships provided through the International Studies office. They were required to pay the balance themselves.<sup>8</sup> In the third year, 15 students took part in the program, the same number as in the second year, but 2 fewer than the first year.

A recent development promises more participation in 3-week intensives in the future. In the last 3 years, the college has developed many more 3-week courses for the January and May intersessions. It has converted some of its financial aid to incoming students from a straight financial award to a credit toward the fee for 3-week study abroad programs. This should further encourage study abroad by students from a broad range of majors and minors.

#### *Logistics*

For all logistical concerns, it helps enormously to know people in the area. It is easier to identify the best people for the program, and the people contacted tend to be more interested and involved if they know the organizers. This was most important in finding homestay families that were reliable, welcoming, and experienced with American students. A key French contact person was a teacher who had worked in Avignon for many years as a director of an American study abroad program (that had relocated to another French city). Because she had organized the homestay arrangements and stayed in contact with the families, she was hired by the college to administer the homestay arrangements. Knowing the families well helped her to match them with students according to their particular dietary, health, and other concerns.

During the program, the students stayed with homestay families for the entire 3 weeks, except for a 4-day excursion to the small town of Taulignan, where they all stayed together with the two faculty members in a rural *gîte* (similar to a bed-and-breakfast). In Avignon, faculty members stayed in an apartment owned by one of the homestay mothers in a neighborhood where several of the students were housed. Families provided students with breakfast and the evening meal. For lunch, they were given tickets to Avignon's college student restaurant.

Other logistics concerns include transportation to, from, and within France. The International Studies office bought air and train tickets for the group, while the lead faculty member handled the buses for excursions. Faculty also organized a range of other activities, such as an introductory party with the host families and a special dinner with a theatre troupe following a play. The faculty arranged all excursions, guest lectures, and workshops (e.g., cooking classes, photography, etc.). There was also the need to arrange for classroom space. Through people he knew in Avignon, the lead faculty member was able to find an organization that housed voluntary associations and was willing to rent classroom space within its building in the center of the city.

Another option for arrangements overseas is working with an already existing program for American students. These programs can often provide homestay families, classroom space, and professors. This requires less ongoing work from faculty and International Studies staff. The advantages of working independently are that the per-student price is usually much lower and it allows for greater flexibility in curricular design, including choice of local faculty and guest speakers.

## Designing Study Abroad Programs: Curriculum

### *The Pre-Avignon Component of the Course*

If 3-week intensive programs are to play a serious role in recasting the language requirement, they must help students integrate the overseas experience with language instruction on campus. In the on-campus pre-Avignon course, students pursued the same grammar curricular objectives as did students in other French 130 sections, but assignments were adapted as much as possible to focus on vocabulary and cultural knowledge that would be particularly useful in Avignon. For example, a section of the class devoted to maps and following directions centered on Avignon so that students learned to find their way through the city on the map and become familiar with the major landmarks before the January trip. Centering the course content on Avignon helped remind students of the practical benefits of language study, and of the fast-approaching date when they would be asked to put their skills into practice.

This helped stretch the benefits of the study abroad experience by bringing Avignon into the classroom.

Focusing on Avignon prior to the trip also helped students connect the abstract process of language learning with the concrete particulars of communication with real French people. In one project, students wrote letters to their host families. Realizing that they were writing to people they would soon be meeting (and in whose homes they would be staying), students were extremely conscientious in crafting their letters, anxious to learn the nuances of different salutations and closings. They were also much more attentive to the distinctions expressed through the mechanics of language (such as the choice between *tu* and *vous*) when reminded of future meetings with host families and others. One student showed how much she had invested of herself in this project when her first homestay host had to withdraw because of illness. Although she had not yet met her host, the student was extremely disappointed after having carefully written her introductory letter. This kind of preparation can help students see the relevance of classroom language study in the United States to their experiential education overseas. By beginning the process of using language to make connections with real people, it makes the classroom itself more experiential.

Perhaps the most important link between study on campus and abroad was the independent research project. In the United States, students wrote a paper centered on a topic of particular interest to them and including consideration of differences between France and the United States. In France, they followed up by conducting participant-observation research in a social setting related to their project, and conducting a follow-up interview. For example, one student did research on the differences between primary school education in France and the United States. In France, she observed a primary school classroom and interviewed the teacher. At the end of the 3 weeks, students presented oral reports discussing how their observations and interviews helped to revise or extend their research. Students were encouraged to invite French people in as audience members and/or as participants in their presentations.

The goals of the independent research project were to personalize each student's language study and overseas experience and to encourage them to find ways of using French to pursue their own interests. This student-centered approach enlisted the students' own curiosity and initiative in shaping the content of the course, and lessened the one-size-fits-all quality of the language requirement.

Other activities also served as a bridge between Avignon and the campus. Students were taught in Avignon by a professor from the college. Being able to draw on a semester-long background helped faculty to guide students' interpretation of their experiences. This was especially valuable for those students who had very little or no overseas experience. It was also much easier to help students

pursue their diverse research interests knowing their work from the previous semester.

Another surprising and rewarding aspect of this program for faculty was getting to know the students individually overseas. Inevitably, one sees only a small part of each student in a semester-long elementary language course. Conversations in the classroom are quite different from the spontaneous discussions on a bus returning from a theatre performance at 2:00 a.m. The issue here is not simply one of greater or lesser empathy for students. If teachers are to help students see the rich complexity of other cultures and the broadly diverse interests that knowledge of a foreign language can serve, they are well advised to know more about the varied backgrounds and aims of their students. The more teachers know about the students, the better they can help them see the value of knowing another language and culture in pursuing their goals.

### *Curriculum: Promoting 'Linguacy' in Avignon*

While students in a semester-long program have more time to find their way to greater linguistic and cultural competency independently, students in a short-term program must be actively directed in their engagement with a foreign culture. Brecht and Ingold (2000) echoed these concerns in discussing the concept of linguacy. Linguacy emphasizes the importance of giving students a foundation for negotiating cultural difference in multicultural settings. Because the key to this is proficiency in an L2, the proficiency movement in foreign language teaching is a positive step forward. Still, they noted, there are many curricular and methodological implications of taking linguacy seriously as a general education mission:

These implications can best be summed up as the need for *flexibility* to respond to a diverse community of learners; for *experientially based learning*, from task-based simulations to genuine cross-linguistic and cross-cultural encounters; and *reflection* on those experiences to develop meta-cognitive strategies and transfer of skills and knowledge (pp. 35–36).

Although study abroad is, as they note, “the quintessential opportunity for linguistic and cultural immersion,” simply putting the students in a foreign environment is not enough. Care must be taken to promote the students’ use of the language and to help them understand the cultural differences they encounter (see Talburt & Stewart, 1999; Wilkinson, 1998). A priority in Avignon was getting students to apply their language skills in immersion settings and helping them make sense of their experiences in the program as a whole.

### *The Homestay Experience*

The most important setting for linguistic and cultural immersion was the homestay living arrangement, some-

thing that was confirmed in course evaluations.<sup>9</sup> Asked to identify the best aspect of the study abroad experience, 5 students cited the homestay family (and 6 others mentioned linguistic or cultural immersion). At the same time, when asked to name the most difficult aspect of the study abroad experience, 3 other students (and 1 of the 5 saying it was the best) mentioned the homestay family.

Perhaps not surprisingly, homestay experiences were central in the students’ journal entries. These reflected both general issues and the particular interests of each student. One political science student active in student government was extremely sensitive to the political opinions of his host mother and carefully noted his understanding of their conversations. Another student with a keen interest in French food provided detailed descriptions of her host family’s meals and their preparation.

All students shared breakfast and dinner in the home, and these meals were a crucial moment for interaction between students and families. This echoes the findings of Knight and Schmidt-Rinehart (2002) who interviewed homestay *señoras* in Spain and Mexico to get their perspective on students’ homestay experiences:

There is no doubt that the meal time was the center of their interaction . . . The señoras we interviewed made the most of this valuable time and often enforced their “Spanish-only” rule by imposing some type of fine if the students spoke in English . . . Several interviewees admitted to us that they, in fact, do not spend much time with the students other than at the dinner table (p. 195).

These statements underline the importance of the dinner table experience as a moment for both establishing rapport with the host family, and improving skills in the target language. In order to foster the best relations possible between students and their hosts, it is important to match the homestay arrangement as closely as possible with student needs. In the pilot year, 2 students insisted on being housed together even though they had been encouraged to accept being housed singly within a family for greater immersion. They ended up happier and made good progress with their French skills. Indeed, some studies have argued that contact with other students is beneficial for learning the target language. As Knight and Schmidt-Rinehart (2002) noted,

Although this seems to negate what our programs are trying to accomplish (i.e., total immersion), there are theoretical models justifying some compatriot association. For example, Wilkinson (1998), citing De Ley’s Stranger Theory, states that “spontaneous formation of home culture ‘islands’ may actually have been the most efficient way for the students to keep from drowning in the French ‘ocean’ while they began to process the barrage of cultural differences and lin-

guistic challenges faced on a daily basis” (p. 32). (Knight & Schmidt-Rinehart, 2002, p. 194.)

The “flexibility in dealing with a diverse community of learners” argued for by Brecht and Ingold (2000) is relevant here in the way programs adapt the overall learning environment for students at different levels and with varied backgrounds. The better the match between students and families, the more students will be able to pursue their own interests and find their own reasons for further travel and language study in the future.

This is especially important given that a warm welcome from the families was so highly valued by the students. One evaluation question asked students to identify the best thing about their housing arrangement. Two students noted the opportunity for learning about French culture and one mentioned the opportunity to improve one’s French. Nine answers noted how nice the family was, suggesting the importance of the homestay as a friendly base in a strange and sometimes hostile environment.<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, four of these nine answers also mentioned food or meals when saying how nice the family was, underlining the mealtime’s importance as a setting where students are made to feel welcome, and where they cultivate a relationship with the families.

### *Guest Lecturers and Excursions*

Guest lecturers were chosen to address three themes:

1. The ways France as a cosmopolitan and pluralist country is addressing issues of diversity;
2. The importance of European integration in France today; and
3. The view from the south of France regarding both 1 and 2.

The starting point was the history of Avignon and the Provence region. A historian of Avignon devoted one afternoon to the city’s evolution and another to his specific area of specialization: the history of Jews in Avignon, especially during the period of the popes in the 14th century. Students also had guided tours in French of selected sites such as the Roman ruins in Vaison-la-Romaine, and Avignon’s Palace of the Popes. In addition to the exposure to the French language, students were introduced to key periods in French history, and were taught the significance of history in France and its manifestations in everyday life in monuments, street names, and political discourse.

In their lectures in English by a political science professor from the University of Avignon, students learned of how this history is important in understanding the genesis of contemporary social diversity in France and in particular, in debates about immigration, religion, and citizenship. Another speaker discussed Avignon’s theatre festival, while

two cooking classes addressed French cooking and the culture of French meals.<sup>11</sup>

### *Informal Language Immersion Settings*

Students attended language class between 10:00 a.m. and 12:00 p.m. every day except Sundays and during the 4-day trip to Taulignan. Other opportunities for language immersion were chosen to help students proceed at their own pace, according to their comfort level in meeting new people and their confidence with the language. In Taulignan, students were given a guided tour of a truffle market, and later ate truffle omelets at a lunch sponsored by the local parent–teacher association in the small town of Richerenches. People from the area were at the lunch and many spoke with our students. In Beaumes-de-Venise, students attended a theatre performance about the history of the region presented especially for them by a community theatre troupe. Afterwards, the actors and friends of the troupe shared a meal with the students in the Beaumes de Venise community center.

Because students in short-term programs do not have time to wait for meetings with natives to arise spontaneously, programs must be designed to include situations where students will have to use the language. As Wilkinson noted, “increased nonclassroom interaction in the target language and miraculous linguistic gains are not inevitable in the study-abroad setting” (1998, p. 33). She notes one student’s statement that “I was just so surprised that you could be in France for a month and . . . really not speak French that often” (p. 33).

In designing informal immersion settings, it helps to match students with native speakers with similar interests so that they have opportunities to integrate language skills with study in other disciplines. In Avignon, some education students visited a middle school and attended an English teacher’s classes. Those who participated said that they had never spoken so much French (and felt as confident speaking it) as they did answering questions for the students. It helped that the French students were younger and “less intimidating,” as one undergraduate put it. The Americans were surprised to find themselves treated like minor celebrities. The middle school teachers told faculty later that the visit generated excitement throughout the school. The American students gained confidence by seeing how well they could express themselves in French when necessary. They also were surprised by the students’ questions and comments and noted how much they had learned about French perceptions of Americans and about life in the United States.

### *Journals: Negotiating Foreigner Status as Americans in France*

Although considerable attention was devoted to French/American differences in the curriculum, many of the issues students cited as examples of difference owed more to their

own sudden foreigner status than to cultural differences between the two countries.

Two themes dominated journal entries: interactions with host families, and the experience of suddenly being identified as American in public. The women were unaccustomed to having men call out to them and/or harass them in public, although one New York student said that it was not all that different at home. One student said that the experience of feeling foreign in France had changed forever the way she would think of immigrants in the United States. Two responses in the evaluations illustrate this sensitivity to being an outsider. In response to the question of what the most difficult aspect of the study abroad experience was, two students replied: "Dealing with the stereotypical French person that hates all Americans," and "Being hauled around like a parade of circus animals and being an obvious American spectacle in France."

While the journal entries contained broad generalizations, they also represented a serious effort to begin thinking about cultural differences and the singularity of American identity in Europe. Several students wrote at length about a lecture by a University of Avignon political science professor concerning the radically different perspectives on the death penalty in the European Union and the United States. In contrast to the individual and more specialized research projects, the journals provided a means for the students to reflect on the interrelations between the diverse components of the program: course readings, lectures, and their personal encounters with homestay families and others.

### **Internationalizing Education Through Study Abroad: Three Students**

An early overseas experience can spur students to pursue more in-depth international study later in their education. It can also show them how an international dimension can unify their studies. The cases of 3 students help to illustrate how study abroad can make language study a central part of a student's education rather than a troublesome general education requirement to get out of the way.

#### *Kiele*

Kiele was a history major. For her independent research project, she studied the Avignon papacy. Kiele did not have strong oral skills in French prior to Avignon but she knew the history of the area and was motivated to learn more. At the Richerenches lunch, she surprised a local French couple next to her who told her they thought she knew more about the region's history than they did. While she spoke haltingly in French, she also managed to get her questions across to our guest lecturer in history, a specialist in the period of the popes. While disappointed that she could not say more, she was excited to realize that she could communicate with people in French about the subject of her

major. After the program, Kiele won a scholarship to study history in England her junior year. This student's experience demonstrates the value of getting students overseas as early as possible. In sharp contrast to the students described by Gorke and Niesenbaum (2001) above, Kiele had gained great confidence in her foreign language skills at the conclusion of her language requirement. She had a positive attitude about travel abroad and took steps to further internationalize her education.

#### *Paul*

Paul was a mathematics major who developed a love for other languages and cultures as an undergraduate. He participated in the college's 3-week study-abroad program in Ghana the year before enrolling in the Avignon program. He also participated in a summer program designed to teach math in elementary schools in rural parts of South Africa. Paul continued his study of French and is 1 of 5 students who went on to our junior year semester-long program in Paris. Paul's case demonstrates that these short-term programs can encourage further language study even among students with majors seemingly unrelated to international issues.

#### *Sarah*

Sarah was a political science major. Her research project addressed recent parity legislation requiring equal representation of male and female candidates in French elections. She asked many questions of our guest lecturer in political science, and of the Assistant Mayor of Taulignan, whom we met during a visit to the town hall. Among other things, she learned that this legislation is not in effect for municipalities as small as Taulignan. These experiences provided her with a broader understanding of parity legislation when she participated in our Paris program the following fall. In the summer she attended a workshop on gender and European integration at the University of Utrecht. Sarah eventually wrote a senior thesis devoted to differences between feminism in France and the United States. She intends to study international law in graduate school. Like the other students, Sarah found a way to build on the skills she developed while completing the language requirement to enhance her overall education. She succeeded in integrating her language study with her coursework in her major (political science/international relations) and in reorganizing her education so that the international dimension was central.

### **Student Evaluations of the Program**

The data presented here from student evaluations generally show high student satisfaction with their study abroad experience. While these are certainly not the only data to consider in evaluating the success or failure of the program's curricular objectives, they help explain some of the reasons for student motivation to continue on with the study of French at the 200 level.

**Table 1**

STUDENTS' RATING OF COURSE EVALUATIONS	
	Average: "Course Mean"
Spring 1997–Fall 1998	3.14
Fall 2001	3.61
French 130 Avignon Fall 2001	4.47

At the end of the program in Avignon, students filled out two evaluations. The first, for the International Studies office, concerned the study abroad experience specifically. The second addressed the French 130 course as a whole (including both on-campus and Avignon components) as part of the college's regular assessment of faculty teaching. Both evaluations were done in France. The evaluations for the course as a whole were much more positive than those of other French 130 sections taught between 1997 and 2001. Table 1 shows the score for the overall "Rating of Course" on a five-point scale compared to the course mean (combined average score of all sections of the evaluated course) for the four semesters of French 130 taught between the spring of 1997 and the fall of 1998.<sup>12</sup> Note that the course mean for fall 2001 is noticeably higher because of the presence of the Avignon section. Students were asked to choose a numbered answer to the following question: "How would you rate this course? 1 = poor; 2 = fair; 3 = satisfactory; 4 = very good; 5 = excellent."

The International Studies evaluations were also very positive. Sixteen students filled out forms. Asked to evaluate the program overall and given four choices (excellent, good, fair, and poor), 9 students chose "excellent" and the other 7 chose "good." Asked if they intended to use their experiences abroad in their career plans (and if so, how?), 7 of the 16 answered yes, with 4 describing specific job fields for which their experiences abroad would be useful. Asked to evaluate the study abroad program in general and its importance to him or her, one student noted, "This was a great experience for me. I am an Ed major so this was my only opportunity to study abroad."

Many evaluation responses suggest that a new confidence in language and travel skills was a big part of student satisfaction with the course: "All the time and effort put into learning another language paid off," and "It was really great in helping me learn about how well I could handle myself in foreign countries."

This is reinforced by answers to the evaluation question "What was your biggest surprise?" Answers included: "How little I called home," "How well I adapted," "How much I understood," and "My French improved."

Eight of the 17 pilot students continued with French courses after the program (4 in a conversation class, 3 in a composition class, and 1 taking both). In the second year

**Table 2**

French 130 Class	Total Students	Students Enrolling in 200-level course
Spring 1998	17	3
Spring 2002	11	1
Fall 2003, Section 1	15	3
Fall 2003, Section 2	12	1
Spring 2004, Section 1	11	2
Spring 2004, Section 2	16	0

of the program, 7 of 15 students continued on with a 200-level French course, while 6 of 15 did so in the third year. Data are not available for all of the French 130 sections taught on campus, but they are available for the six shown in Table 2.

All told, out of 82 students taking French 130 on campus in these sections, only 10 continued on with a French 200-level course, or roughly 12%. Of the 46 Avignon students, 19 have enrolled in a 200-level course, or roughly 41%. Twelve of the 19 have taken more than one French course. Most of these students chose to minor in French.

These results show that the Avignon program has been successful in motivating more students to pursue language study at the 200 level. The argument here is not simply that students studying abroad enjoy it more than do students completing the 130 course on the college's home campus. This might be expected, particularly with students paying only \$300 and \$500 the first 2 years. It is rather that this satisfaction led the study abroad students to enroll in 200-level language courses in greater numbers than their non-Avignon schoolmates. It should also be noted that the numbers of students continuing on with French did not drop considerably in the third year when students paid between \$1,150 and \$1,700. The fact that such a high percentage of Avignon students continued on with French indicates that these students succeeded in finding ways to integrate language study with their coursework in other disciplines.<sup>13</sup> By providing students with a linguistic and cultural immersion experience and encouraging them to pursue further language training, this program has helped to further three of the four missions defined by Brecht and Walton (1995): the general education mission (through promoting broader cultural awareness), and the applied and specialist missions (through encouraging further language study for greater linguistic proficiency in both practical and research contexts).

### Implications for the Future

Much more could be done in the future to ensure that students understand the cultural codes underlying "strange" French practices. As Wilkinson (1998) noted, merely

immersing students in a foreign culture does not necessarily provide greater cultural awareness:

Deep cultural understanding cannot be guaranteed . . . particularly if participants have only their own cultural perspective with which to make sense of actions motivated by an alternative and invisible set of rules. (p. 33)

She noted that the students in her study encountered many examples of cultural differences in interactions with French people, but without a French perspective to interpret them, these contacts led to stereotyping and denigration rather than empathy for another cultural perspective. There were similar cases in Avignon (as illustrated by the previously noted comment about the “stereotypical French person”) when students seemed to misinterpret French cultural patterns. For example, some students commented on the rudeness of French waiters in taking so long to bring their check to them. They interpreted this as deliberate disrespect toward Americans, rather than as a standard courtesy to café patrons in France who are free to stay as long as they like.<sup>14</sup> Because they show how important cultural awareness is to cultivating communicative competence in students, such experiences demonstrate the need for making training in cross-cultural difference an integral part of the study abroad experience.

In particular, future students will be better informed about the importance of the evening meal and how to integrate smoothly into their family’s way of life. It is also important that communication with the families be improved. In evaluations from the 2001 group, 2 of the 16 students mentioned food in answer to the question “What did you like least about your housing arrangement?” Their answers were: “If you don’t like the food, it is hard to tell them because they cooked it specifically for you” and “the food—being paranoid about what to do and what not to do with my host family.”

Better preparation from students, home institutions, and the in-country program (and greater communication among the three) are central elements in Knight and Schmidt-Rinehart’s (2002) helpful summary table of suggestions for enhancing the homestay experience. They argued for attending more closely to the families’ perspectives: “If there is to be a homestay advantage, the voices of families must be heard and their potential must be more fully realized” (p. 198). Working more closely with the families could help tap the greater potential of the homestay experience and incorporate it more fully into the curriculum.

In Avignon, future assignments will address cultural difference directly so that in-class discussions take advantage of out-of-class experiences. Raschio (2001) employed a similar strategy with a January-term group in Spain. Students studied cultural themes in a conversation class prior to going abroad. He noted that

[T]he articulation of our cultural themes and the broader cultural topics that formed the backbone of the Conversation courses provided extended opportunities for students to process the information and their impressions of the various cultural phenomena they were to encounter during the experience. Learners . . . were able to see how the cultural themes we required them to investigate related to, or derived from, the topics that served as the foundation of their course. (p. 535)

The “integrative” activities Raschio recommended include interviews with host families or others, observation of selected settings, and discussion of problems in dealing with people in the host country. Addressing these areas can help students adjust to difficult situations and guide them to the combined linguistic and cultural knowledge—the linguacy—that allows one to negotiate unfamiliar situations in a foreign environment. The development of these skills in one environment can prepare students to be life-long learners of linguistic and cultural differences and thereby realize the general education goals of a collegewide language requirement.

## Conclusion

If planned carefully, short-term study abroad programs can be a vital means of fulfilling the general education mission of a collegewide foreign language requirement. Recent research underlines the importance of integrating all aspects of the study abroad experience (homestay, excursions, classes, and both pre- and post-travel experiences on campus). If students are given the tools they need to make the most of the study abroad experience, they can complete their language requirement more confident in their language skills and more motivated to deepen their knowledge of other languages and cultures through language study and travel abroad.

By integrating language study and cultural immersion, short-term study abroad programs offer a means of addressing the disjuncture between student needs and the foreign language curriculum of most American colleges. As they decode mysterious cross-cultural encounters overseas, students draw on skills associated with three of the college foreign language missions (applied, specialist, and general education). By learning the patterns of discourse needed to live with host families and others, students are doing more than just employing grammatical tools. They are learning through experience how language operates as a vital medium of culture, and how “applied” linguistic proficiency depends both on the skills associated with the specialist mission, and on the cross-cultural understanding promoted in the general education mission. They are learning “an understanding of the nature of culture and the social and cognitive aspects of language in culture” (Brecht & Ingold, 2000, p. 32).

Through fostering linguacy, short-term interdisciplinary study abroad programs can recast the foreign language requirement and address our pressing national needs for greater linguistic and cultural competence.

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## Notes

1. The France trip was required in order to earn a passing grade for the entire course.

2. Other studies confirm that many students desire applied skills, and particularly oral proficiency (Alalou, 2001; Alalou & Chamberlain, 1999; Antes, 1999), and that these skills do not receive the attention they should in the curriculum. In a study of the perceived needs and expectations of college-level students of French, Alalou and Chamberlain noted that “the skills students perceive as important, the activities in which they would like to engage, and the reasons for which they study French point to common concerns: students show an interest in learning to use the language in the work place and to communicate in real-life settings” (1999, p. 32). Alalou concluded: “it is important that administrators and instructors alike take an active interest in student needs . . . this or any FL program should offer motivating courses in which both sociolinguistic and pragmatic aspects of language, as well as those skills most valued by students, are taken into account. In addition, FL language programs must encourage students who express a personal interest in the language to continue their study well beyond an undergraduate requirement” (p. 34).

3. “Inhering in development of *linguacy* is the development of four areas of competency: 1) some level of functional competence in a language other than one’s own; 2) an understanding of the nature of culture and the social and cognitive aspects of language in culture; 3) effective strategies for learning languages of other cultures in the future—those not acquired during school years; 4) knowledge and skills necessary to manage communication and knowledge transfer across languages and cultures” (Brecht & Ingold, 2000, p. 32).

4. It is worth noting here Lambert’s conclusion based on years of study of American foreign language instruction:

If I were to pick the one aspect of our foreign language system that should receive the greatest amount of attention in planning, it is not the instructional process itself but increasing the societal demand for and use of foreign language skills (1994, p. 56).

5. The college is predominantly undergraduate, with graduate programs in education and historic preservation but none in foreign language. There are 150 faculty overall, with 9 full-time professors and 5 part-time instructors in the Modern Languages Department. The college has always emphasized experiential learning through extensive internship, service learning, and research opportunities. In recent years, especially since the arrival of a new President, the college has given increased importance to study abroad as part of a strong commitment to internationalizing the curriculum.

6. Special funding for the language immersion programs was discontinued in 2003.

7. The Avignon program was the only one of the college’s three language intensive programs that had such an extensive prestudy abroad component. The other two programs include a 1-credit “Gateway” course prior to the trip, and then give 4 credits for the study abroad course. Faculty are paid for the 1-credit overload in the fall and the 3-week course counts as one course toward their six-course yearly teaching load. Because the Avignon lead instructor received credit for teaching two courses (for 5 credits) while the faculty from other language intensive programs received credit for only one course for 5 credits, a change was required. In 2005, the Avignon program will include a special 4-credit French 130 section on campus followed by a 3-credit 200-level course in Avignon. Students in other 130 sections (or having already taken 130) will be also be eligible to apply to the program but priority will be given to those in the special pre-Avignon section. While students in the pre-Avignon course will make a commitment to going to France early in the semester, they will have completed the language requirement at the end of the pre-Avignon 130 course. By removing the curriculum shared with other 130 sections from the study abroad component, this should allow more freedom in shaping the Avignon curriculum so that it takes greater advantage of the immersion environment. Another proposal that would have kept the study abroad course at the 100-level and respected requirements for faculty course load involved dividing the program into two courses, a 3-credit pre-Avignon course, and a 3-credit course in Avignon (with students needing both courses to complete the language requirement).

8. The per-student price included all expenses for the program, including transportation to, from, and within France, housing, food, and all other fees (museum tickets, etc.). In 2005, the program price was changed to \$1,950 but this did not include airfare. The per-student price was kept under \$2,000 with the aid of a \$1,000 contribution from the Office of International Studies. The main reasons for the rise in price were the unfavorable dollar–euro exchange rate, the move to May which made some activities more expensive, and the lower number of students (8) which raised the per-student fee.

9. These are discussed in more detail in the section, Student Evaluations of the Program.

10. “They’re so nice, it’s scary,” one student wrote.

11. In one course, a homestay mother led the students (in groups of 5) in creating and sharing a French meal. In another all-day course, three chefs directed all 17 students as they rotated to different stations in preparing a menu of Provençal specialties.

12. Scores of 130 sections between the spring of 1998 and spring of 2001 are not available because the author did not teach French 130 during that period.

13. It might be argued that the Avignon experience did not result in fundamental change for these students since the students selected were already the most motivated and therefore the most likely to continue with language study. But it should be noted that the Avignon pilot group was not composed of only A students. In the preceding French 120 class, Avignon participants included students who had earned 2 Cs and 5 Bs. In addition, some students expressed a dramatic change in their attitude toward further language study. Asked how they evaluated the study abroad program in general and its importance to them, one student responded: "This program has been a major factor in my decision to study abroad next year and to minor in French." Most encouraging was this answer to the question of how students would make use of their experiences abroad once back on campus: "If I can I would like to continue with French, whereas before I had no desire to."

14. Wylie and Brière (1995) also discussed this misinterpretation of "anti-Americanism" (p. 299).

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