



Document Category: Article in *Inside Higher Ed*

Date: December 1st, 2010

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The French Academic Diaspora

WASHINGTON -- The Richard Lounsbery Award (overseen by the National Academy of Sciences and its French counterpart) goes each year to a young scientist who has demonstrated "extraordinary scientific achievement in science and medicine." The prize typically alternates between French and American scientists. The last three French winners teach at Harvard, Rockefeller and Columbia Universities.

That anecdote was one bit of evidence cited by Ioanna Kohler, the author of a new analysis (available here, in French only) by the Institut Montaigne, a French think tank, on the issue of brain drain to the United States. Many developing nations worry about losing their top academic talent to universities in the United States or other Western nations, many times as soon as doctorates are earned in those countries.

In the case of France, a country proud of its academic traditions, raising the issue can be sensitive -- as was evident at a briefing at the French Embassy here Tuesday. While Kohler fielded polite questions from the Americans in the audience, she received several critical ones from representatives of French academic groups that were present, and several of them scoffed at parts of her presentation.

Kohler held her ground. "I'm sorry if it's not pleasant to hear," she said. And she cited a series of examples and statistics that suggest some sort of migration that is favoring the United States when it comes to top French talent.

The American Economic Association gives the John Bates Clark medal every other year to the economist under the age of 40 judged to have made the most notable contributions to the field. The last two winners are both French, and their honors have been "a point of pride" in the country, Kohler said. But the most recent winner, Esther Duflo, teaches at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. And the prior winner, Emmanuel Saez, teaches at the University of California at Berkeley. Kohler also cited the Nobel Prizes and said that two of the five French scientists to win since World War II were living in the United States (although she was challenged from the audience about who counts as a French scientist).

Mathematics, an area of traditional French strength, may be one in which France remains relatively successful. Of the last 18 recipients of the Fields Medal (viewed as a Nobel equivalent for mathematics), seven were French, and not part of the new French academic diaspora. But one of the last two winners was just hired by the University of Chicago.

If these award trends captured the attention of the audience, so did some of the statistics cited in the report. For instance, a study to identify the top French researchers in economics and biology found that about 40 percent live in the United States.

For the report, Kohler interviewed many of the researchers who have settled in the United States about what attracted them -- and what could lure them back. She stressed that there is a positive side to the story, even from a French perspective, in that all of this hiring in the U.S. shows that French academics are "fully exportable" and says something about the quality of the French system. Still, she said that the country needs to be worried about the loss of talent -- and to consider the "return on investment" question, since many of these academics were trained for years at taxpayer-supported French universities and research institutes.

Why did the academics tell her they left? "We tend to think that the top issue is the financial one," she said, but by far the main reason cited was the ability, at top American universities, to be surrounded by "a critical mass" of leading scholars. Those who have left France also cite the international nature of American research universities, where many more nations are represented than may be the case in France, said one audience member.

In terms of finances, she said that American academics (both young stars and those whose careers have been well established) earn more than their French counterparts. But beyond average salary figures, one key difference is that French universities do not differentiate based on the market demands for various disciplines in a way that American universities do. So biomedical scientists, economists and others in fields for which American universities pay top dollar stand to gain the most from moving to the United States.

The report Kohler wrote calls for a series of reforms, some of which wouldn't seem controversial. For example, the report urges French organizations to track those academics who leave the country, to identify trends in their movement, and to keep them involved in academic issues in France.

Other changes could be more controversial. For example, the report calls for the use of "personalized recruitment packages" to attract some scholars back from the United States, more of a willingness to recruit spouses at the same time (a strategy that is, of course, common in the United States), greater inclination to view academic recruitment as international in nature, and improved efforts to identify job openings in France that might appeal to the best foreign talent.

Issues related to salaries may be among the most contentious.

Ben Wildavsky, a senior scholar in research and policy at the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation and author of *The Great Brain Race*, appeared with Kohler at the French Embassy. In his book, Wildavsky argues that academic excellence is not a zero sum game and that it's a good thing that there is more competition for academic talent. Still, he said Tuesday that "without being alarmist," there is good reason for a country like France to worry about its loss of talent.

He argued -- to the visible discomfort of some of the French academics in the audience -- that the "culture of egalitarianism" and a "culture of mediocrity" have eroded the quality of French universities. (He later said he "withdrew" the word "mediocrity" and that he should have referred instead to a culture of "insufficient excellence.") Some of those who were challenging the report, he said, showed "elements of denial."

When the topic of differential salaries by disciplines came up and several in the audience made clear their view that this American practice is inappropriate, Wildavsky said that it was "crazy" to think that universities

could operate without market influences. Differential salaries make sense, he said, 'if you believe in the market, if you believe in classical liberalism.'