

French Professors Find Life in U.S. Hard to Resist

PARIS — Academics are increasingly leaving France for the United States, which carries the risk of a “brain drain” in France, according to a report this month by an independent study group.

The report, by the Institut Montaigne, a leading independent research group in Paris, found that academics constitute a much larger percentage of French émigrés to the United States today than 30 years ago. According to the report, between 1971 and 1980, academics represented just 8 percent of the departing population; between 1996 and 2006, they represented 27 percent of the departing population.

“The acceleration of French scientific emigration to the United States is recent and worrisome,” said the report, called “Gone for good? The expatriates of French higher education in the United States.”

Of the 2,745 French citizens who obtained a doctorate in the United States from 1985 to 2008, 70 percent settled there, the study found.

The number of French scientists who leave France for the United States remains limited, but the exodus of the country’s most talented scientists could hurt the economy, the report suggested.

“Those who leave France are the best, the most prolific and the best integrated on an international scale,” said the report, which surveyed about a hundred French researchers and professors who studied in France’s top universities and elite schools like the École Normale Supérieure and the École Polytechnique.

Many of France’s best biologists and economists can now be found in the United States. According to a study in 2007 by the École des Mines that looked at the 100 best economists in the world, according to the amount of their work published from 1990 and 2000, four of the six top French researchers in economics had left France for the United States.

“Biology and economics are poorly recognized in France,” said Thomas Philippon, a French economist who began teaching finance at New York University Stern School of Business in 2003. “But the problem also comes from the fact that the French labor market doesn’t value Ph.D. theses.”

The Institut Montaigne study concluded that, for the most talented French economics students, studies in the United States are an “obligatory step” toward a doctorate.

Two of France’s best-known economists teach in the United States at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and obtained their doctorates there. One of them, Olivier Blanchard, is also the chief economist at the International Monetary Fund. The other economist, Esther Duflo, received the John Bates Clark Medal

in 2010, which is one of most prestigious awards in economics. Dr. Duflo was granted tenure at 29 years old, making her one of the youngest professors to receive tenure at the university.

The emigrant trend is more recent among French biologists, but their numbers have grown significantly. "Biology is an extremely competitive field," said Gérard Karsenty, a professor of genetics and development at Columbia University in New York.

"The notion of competition, the acceptance of competition is more in harmony with the American culture than the French and Latin one," he added.

The brain drain in French academia has been observed in other arenas, as well. The field of musical composition, for example has been hurt by the trend, and composers are few, training offers scarce and jobs rare. "We are in the process of killing contemporary music in France," said an unidentified composer cited in the report.

Today, many French academics working in the United States say their choice to leave their country was largely motivated by an American system "where universities are larger, richer and more flexible than in France," said Dr. Philippon, the professor at New York University.

Mr. Karsenty, the biologist, said: "Scientific education in the U.S. embraces the philosophy of science, which is a solitary and competitive field."

The French lifestyle, which puts a higher value on quality of living and less emphasis on competition and getting ahead, is no longer sufficient to keep talented researchers in France, many scientists said. In a country where science is often viewed as cut off from society, French universities do little to glorify their researchers, they said, and offer working conditions that are often mediocre.

"The freedom that academics garner in France is invaluable," said Rava da Silveira, a physicist who teaches neuroscience at the École Normale Supérieure and collaborates with researchers at Princeton, Harvard, and Stanford, "but with it comes a deplorable waste of talent. People interact much less through informal discussions, and there is little team spirit or consultation, in particular between faculty and students."

Upon moving to France after nine years in the United States, Dr. da Silveira said, his salary was cut by about two-thirds.

Like many other researchers, he agreed that the rigidity of the French higher education system and a lack of financing, infrastructure and administrative help have prevented France's scientific talents from reaching their full potential in France.

For Pierre-André Chiappori, a professor of economics at Columbia who is mentioned in the report, the American model is unique, and U.S. universities are havens of knowledge, the likes of which cannot be found in France.

“If the United States attracts some of the best researchers in France, it is also true that a lot of them become better in the United States,” Dr. Chiappori was quoted as saying. “My only regret, in that matter, is that I should have come earlier.”