

The Equality of Opportunity Program Initiative on Selective Higher Education Study Tour, Report, and Conferences (November 2007-April 2008)

Equal Opportunity in Selective Higher Education: A Common Goal for France and the United States

In 2007, the Equality of Opportunity program developed a major initiative focusing on education. This project stemmed from a concern that applies to the educational systems in both countries: the under-representation of students from racial-ethnic minorities or recent immigrant backgrounds in higher education institutions, particularly the most selective schools, called *grandes écoles* in France.

The French-American Foundation has been conducting a study of American "color-blind" admissions procedures, called "percentage plans," and such plans' potential relevance for France. This project entailed a study tour to Texas and California, the publication of a report for policymakers and education stakeholders in France, and a series of conferences in Paris.

French and American Strategies to Broaden Access to Selective Higher Education

In France, several renowned higher education institutions recently launched pilot programs to reform their admissions policies. These programs, intended to increase educational opportunities for disadvantaged students, avoid any reference to racial or ethnic origin because the collection and use of ethno-racial statistics is prohibited by French law. Instead, such initiatives introduced a geography-based approach in their recruitment processes and outreach programs to attract a more diverse applicant pool. These range from special admissions processes to recruit talented students from ZEPs (*Zones d'éducation prioritaire* or underprivileged "educational priority zones"), to one-on-one tutoring and academic guidance to selected high school students of modest socio-economic backgrounds or special classes to prepare underprivileged students to apply for entrance into a *grande école*.

Such programs have proven successful, but their impact has been limited insofar as they have been restricted to a small applicant pool and limited geographic areas. A nationwide strategy to democratize access to selective higher education has yet to be designed.

In the United States, to counter the drop in African-American and Hispanic enrollments in selective state universities following the ban on race-based affirmative action policies in their states in the mid-1990s, Texas, Florida, and California have adopted (or revised) percentage plan admissions systems. Percentage plans are "color-blind" and rely on geographic – and therefore socio-economic – criteria rather than race or ethnicity to attract a more diverse student body. They grant automatic admission to the top x percent of graduates of all high schools statewide.

Study of U.S. Color-blind Admissions Policies and their Relevance for French Educational Reform

This study on the percentage plans is particularly timely as this admissions policy has sparked growing interest in France among policy-makers and education officials. Percentage plans are most relevant to the "color-blind" French *modèle républicain*, in which egalitarianism and meritocracy are highly valued, and where policy cannot be race-based as in U.S. affirmative action. It has been argued that a French percentage plan akin to the U.S. system would broaden educational opportunities not only for students from areas with large minority or immigrant populations, but for applicants coming from underprivileged neighborhoods, outlying French provinces, and the French overseas departments.



French President Nicolas Sarkozy has expressed strong support for a French percentage plan system. In his mission statements to both Ministers of Education and Higher Education of July 2007, he set a goal to "foster social diversity" in the preparatory classes leading to the most selective higher education institutions by admitting students finishing in the top 5 percent of their high school graduating class. In March 2008, another step was taken: every *recteur* – the highest education administrator in each French region – has been urged to encourage the best high school graduates to apply to preparatory classes to *grandes écoles*, especially graduates coming from high schools located in underprivileged areas.

Study Tour to the University of Texas at Austin and the University of California at Berkeley (November 12-16, 2007)

In November 2007, the French-American Foundation conducted a study tour in Texas and California for a high-level French delegation to learn about the percentage plans admissions procedures used by the state university systems. This study tour proved to be an opportunity to share information about the intent, design, and impact of these policies in Texas and California which date from more than a decade ago. The goal of the Foundation was not to endorse a particular policy approach but to examine the effects of these policies with French experts and policy-makers.

"This study tour took a thorough approach to the Texas and California percentage plans. I found it most instructive to meet with the stakeholders who contributed to the design of these admissions policies and get their feedback on their extensive experience. I was also especially interested to see the relationship of two American public flagship universities with elected officials and the general public as these institutions were implementing major reforms. This insight was all the more relevant as France has started to reform its higher education system and faces some similar challenges."

Claire Giry, Senior Advisor to the French Prime Minister

The delegation included a senior official from the French government, administrators from a renowned higher education institution and a selective high school, a journalist from *Le Monde* specialized in higher education, and leading academics with expertise in education policy in France and the United States. (Please see next page.)

This study tour gave key French policy-makers a first-hand look into the challenges of promoting equal opportunity in a “color-blind” legal framework. The French delegates were exposed to a variety of perspectives on the percentage plans and their impact on universities, high schools, and student populations.

The delegation’s experience was enhanced by the participation of a wide range of American stakeholders: university officials, faculty members, elected officials, minority organizations, outreach organizations, university students, and high school administrators and students. (Please see list on page 4)



Meeting with Dean Christopher Edley, at UC Berkeley School of Law

Study Tour Outcomes: Report and Conferences in Paris (April 2008)

Report

Following the November study tour, the French-American Foundation published a 40-page report in French on the tour’s findings, which included policy recommendations for the French selective higher education system.

This report was written by Program Director Ioanna Kohler with the contribution of Daniel Sabbagh, Senior Research Fellow at CERI-Sciences Po. It was widely distributed to French policy-makers, government and education officials, *grande école* and high school administrators, researchers, and thought-leaders interested in education policy and pro-equality measures.

“From my perspective, the Texas 10% shows that major reform in admissions policies can be implemented without years of experimentation. A law was passed, which banned affirmative action policies, and the admissions administrators at UT had to come up with a new system to ensure diversity in this new context. What I find remarkable is the way UT Austin, thanks to the statistics issued by the policy analysis department, is able to assess the system’s efficiency on a regular basis. This is also a key element to the success of their percentage plan. To me, such a system can – and should – be applied in France.”

Patrick Weil, Senior Research Fellow at CNRS

Conferences

The French-American Foundation also organized a series of conferences in Paris timed with the release of the report (April 2008). Two American experts, who participated in the November 2007 study tour, were invited to Paris to present the percentage plans systems of their respective universities:

Saul Geiser, Ph. D., Senior Research Fellow, The Center for Studies in Higher Education, UC Berkeley; former Director of Research and Evaluation for Admissions and Outreach at the Office of the President of the University of California;

Gary M. Lavergne, M. Ed., Director of Admissions Research and Policy Analysis, The University of Texas at Austin.

These events, in which certain members of the study tour French delegation participated, included

- a seminar for researchers and post-doctoral students which took place at Sciences Po, as part of “Educ-Elites,” a seminar series co-sponsored by Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS);
- a roundtable discussion at Lycée Henri IV for an audience of professionals and administrators in secondary and higher education;
- a high-profile workshop at the Ministry of Higher Education under the aegis of Minister of Higher Education and Research Valérie Pécresse.

Study tour delegation:

Emma Archer, Director of Cultural Programs, French-American Foundation

Patrice Corre, Principal of *Lycée Henri IV* in Paris, one of France’s top high schools

Chantal Dardelet, Administrator from the ESSEC business school and Coordinator of the social diversity program at *Conférence des Grandes Écoles*

Claire Giry, Senior Advisor to the French Prime Minister for higher education and research

Félicie Goyet, Coordinator of the program *Une grande école, pourquoi pas moi ?* at the ESSEC business school

Ioanna Kohler, Director of Policy Programs, in charge of the Equality of Opportunity Program, French-American Foundation

Catherine Rollot, Journalist from daily newspaper *Le Monde*

Daniel Sabbagh, Senior Research Fellow at Centre d’Études et de Recherches Internationales (CERI-Sciences Po)

Patrick Weil, Senior Research Fellow at Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS)

Agnès van Zanten, Senior Research Fellow at Centre National de la Recherche (CNRS) Scientifique, Observatoire Sociologique du Changement (OSC-Sciences Po)

The workshop at the Ministry of Higher Education informed policy-makers of the conclusions from the percentage plans study tour. It included members of the presidential and the prime minister's cabinets, as well as senior policy staff from the Ministry of Higher Education and Research and other senior education administrators.

This meeting allowed French policy-makers and American higher education experts to engage in direct dialogue.



Workshop held under the aegis of Minister of Higher Education Valérie Pécresse

During these conferences, the American experts provided an in-depth analysis of the percentage plans admissions system, emphasizing the design process of the plans, the challenges encountered while implementing this new admissions policy, and the policy's results. The French policy-makers were especially interested in the criteria for selecting the best students, the outreach programs developed to support this policy, the impact on the social diversity of the freshman class, and the public reaction to this system.

"I learned a lot from the rich dialogue with our American counterparts in higher and secondary education. As the coordinator of a tutoring program at the ESSEC business school, I was particularly interested in the outreach initiatives implemented in Texas and California for underprivileged high school students. Some of these initiatives are similar to the ones we have been developing at the ESSEC since 2002; others have given us some fresh insights."

Although the selective higher education system in France is more complex than the American one, the percentage plans could be a means to provide access to a more diverse student body. In my view, if such a system were to be implemented in France, it should be accompanied by an extensive outreach strategy.

I would also like to add that I greatly profited from the dialogue with French delegates, who are all extremely committed to education."

Félicie Goyet, Coordinator of the ESSEC program "Une grande école, pourquoi pas moi?"

The Top 4 Percent Plan in California – Saul Geiser, Ph. D., Research Associate, The Center for Studies in Higher Education (CSHE), UC Berkeley; former Director of Research and Evaluation for admissions and outreach at the Office of the President of the University of California.

"After affirmative action was ended by California voters, minority enrollments plummeted at the University of California, and the UC system struggled to find ways to maintain access for Latino, African American, and American Indian students without use of racial preferences in university admissions. UC introduced a number of new admissions policies, the most important of which was "Eligibility in the Local Context," which offered admission to the top four percent of graduates from each high school in California. My presentation described the social and political context of UC's Top 4 Percent Plan, key issues in its design and implementation, and results and outcomes of the policy. It also examined other UC policy initiatives undertaken to maintain minority access in a post-affirmative action context, including reform of standardized admissions tests, comprehensive review of applications, and university outreach to low-performing schools".

The Texas Top 10 % Law: Implementation and Results –

Gary M. Lavergne, M. Ed., Director of Admissions Research and Policy analysis, The University of Texas at Austin

"The admissions process of any university is an exercise in both selecting qualified students with a high probability of success, and crafting an entering class that also meets the university's mission and responsibilities to its constituents. Before 1996 the University of Texas at Austin used affirmative action (race-conscious admission) as a tool to reach its racial diversity goals for its entering freshman classes. In 1996, as a result of the Hopwood court case, Texas universities were forced to abandon affirmative action and implement race-neutral admissions policies. In 1997, the Texas State Legislature passed the "Texas Top 10% Automatic Admissions Law." Today, any student graduating in the top 10% of his/her Texas high school class is automatically admissible to any public college or university in the state—including the flagship University of Texas at Austin. The intent of the law was to maintain or increase racial ethnic diversity within the judicial mandate for racially-neutral admissions policies. My presentation contained a brief political history of the Texas Top 10% Law, an overview of the challenges for implementation, and results and lessons learned after ten years of experience".

American Participants in the Study Tour

TEXAS

University of Texas at Austin

Leticia Acosta, Director of International Alumni Relations

Dr. Ge Chen, Special Assistant for Assessment, Division of Diversity and Community Engagement

Augustine Garza, Deputy Director of Admissions, Office of Public Affairs

Gwen Grigsby, Associate Vice President for Governmental Relations, Office of the Vice President for Institutional Relations and Legal Affairs

Susan Kessler, Associate Executive Director of Alumni Association, staff liaison with Black Alumni and Hispanic Alumni Steering Committees

Gary Lavergne, Director of Admissions Research and Policy Analysis

Derrick Miller, Scholarships Coordinator of Alumni Association

Michael Orr, Associate Director of Admissions

Professor Gerald Torres, Bryant Smith Chair in Law, School of Law

Bruce Walker, Vice Provost and Director of Admissions

Amy Yearwood, Assistant Director of Admissions, Exes for Texas Program

Students:

Veronica Foreman, Sociology major from Houston, Texas (non- top 10% applicant)

Enrique Jasso, English major from El Paso, Texas (top 10% applicant)

Hunter Matson, Government major from Arkansas (out of state applicant)

Manan Parikh, Biochemistry major from Maryland (out of state applicant)

Greg Share, Advertising major from Coppell, Texas (top 10% applicant)

Amanda Villarreal, Liberal Arts student from Corpus Christi, Texas (non- top 10% applicant)

Westlake high school

Jeff Pilchick, Director of Guidance and College Counseling

Dr. Noa Wellman, Superintendent

Travis high school

Dr. Rene Garganta, Principal

Adriana Urbano, Counselor

Texas Senate

Dr. Warren Von Eschenbach, Director of the Texas Senate Higher Education Subcommittee

Texas House of Representatives

Geanie Morrison, Texas State Representative District 30

CALIFORNIA

University de California at Berkeley

Teresa Arriaga, Director – Early Academic Outreach Program (Center for Educational Partnerships)

John Douglass, Senior Research Fellow at Center for Studies in Higher Education

Dean Christopher Edley, Professor of Law, Boalt School of Law

Carlos Fernandez-Pello, Associate Dean for Fellowships and Diversity, Graduate division

Saul Geiser, Senior Research Fellow, Center for Studies in Higher Education

Miya Hayes, Assistant Director – School/University Partnerships (Center for Educational Partnerships)

Goodwin Liu, Assistant Professor of Law

David Montejano, Associate Professor of Ethnic Studies

Jose Rivas, Director – Destination: College Advising Corps (Center for Educational Partnerships)

Walter Robinson, Director of Undergraduate Admissions

Norris Sanders, Director – Educational Guidance Center (Center for Educational Partnerships)

David Stern, Professor of Education

Carla Utrillo, Director, Graduate Diversity Program

French-American Foundation — Statement of Purpose

The French-American Foundation is the principal non-governmental organization linking France and the United States at leadership levels and across the full range of the French-American relationship. The purpose of the French-American Foundation is to strengthen the French-American relationship as a vital component of the trans-Atlantic partnership. This mission is accomplished through a variety of initiatives that include multi-year policy programs, conferences on issues of French-American interest, and leadership and professional exchanges of decision-makers from France and the United States. Founded in 1976, the Foundation is an operating organization that relies on outside financial support to carry out its mission and does not provide grants. It is an independent, non-partisan, non-profit organization with 501(c)(3) tax-exempt status. Contributions are deductible to the full extent allowed by law.

About the Equality of Opportunity program

The French-American Foundation launched in 2006 a major new policy program on French and American strategies to fight discrimination and to promote greater equality of opportunity for minority and immigrant populations. It focuses on education and employment, critical means for social integration. As with the French-American Foundation previous policy programs, the Equality of Opportunity program provides an in-depth comparative perspective on an issue of common concern in France and the United States, engages key decision-makers and impacts public debates and policymaking in both countries.

The Equality of Opportunity program was initially funded by major support from the Ford Foundation and additional support from the Florence Gould Foundation. In early 2008, the Ford Foundation renewed its generous support to this program. Additional financing is being sought for program initiatives in development.

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