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Eleanor Kirkpatrick Franco-American Fellowship Program

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### Post-Secondary Schooling Paths in France

As an Oklahoman high school senior, I am intimately familiar with the American education system. I am also painfully aware of all of its shortcomings, especially in the post-secondary school sector. When given the unbelievable opportunity to take a personal dive into an aspect of French society, I was compelled to investigate the French post-secondary education system to compare it to mine. During my two weeks at Lycee Marie Curie, I believe that I successfully untangled the complex post-secondary education system in France effectively enough both to explain it and to use it to improve the American system. A particularly intriguing part of my research was the process of choosing a post-secondary path and the role of high school in career choice.

In France, the choices a student makes in high school change their post-secondary options much more dramatically than they do here. Therefore, in order to fully understand post-secondary education, it is necessary to first understand the secondary system. All French students must take the Baccalaureate, the collective name for a series of tests to graduate. There are three types of Baccalaureate: General, Technological, and Professional. Students in the different Baccalaureate programs follow completely different and separate curriculum in separate classes. The general program is generally

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regarded to be the most difficult, with the most traditional classes such as history, math, and science. The professional program has fewer traditional classes, but students also learn a trade, such as metalworking or auto-mechanics. The technological program is a middle ground between the two. Within each of the three types of Baccalaureate, there are many more specific specialties. In the General program, the specialties are scientific, social and economic, and literary. In the Technological program, there are eight specialties including technology of health, technology of industry, and technology of the arts. In the Profession program, there are eighty nine specialties such as transportation, cosmetics, and commerce.

Students in the Professional Baccalaureate program graduate with a trade; this means that they can enter the workforce directly out of high school. Many Professional students go to BTS or DUT after high school, which are two or three year programs for a professional license in their trade. This would be comparable to a vocational school in the United States. Professional students can attend other forms of post-secondary education, but it is common because they are ill-prepared in comparison with other students.

Students in the General and Technological Baccalaureate must go to some sort of post-secondary school, because they graduate without a trade. However, the traditional University education that we are familiar with here is only one of many options for these

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students. Many students attend traditional university (called FACS short for faculties) to obtain a bachelors/masters/doctorate degree in a study. However, these degrees are only necessary in certain fields such as anthropology, philosophy, and teaching. If a French student wants to become a doctor, they enter PACES (medical school) immediately after high school. Many other fields such as engineering, art, commerce, law, and dance have individual schools that operate separately from university and do not require an undergraduate degree. Most of these programs are three to six years long, depending on the program and the level of license a student is pursuing. All of these options are open to all French students, but the curriculum a student follows in high school determines how well prepared they are. For instance, most students in medical school took the General Baccalaureate with a specialty in science.

Together, these program differences means that students have different options based on the Baccalaureate program they chose when they entered high school at age fifteen. For an American, this seemed extraordinarily daunting. However, when I spoke to French students, I discovered that the amount of resources in school and in the community make the process much less scary. At the end of middle school when students are fourteen, each French student is required to choose a business to visit and an adult to shadow for two weeks. This is designed to give students a chance to see the realities of

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careers they are interested in pursuing. I met several students who claimed that they changed their minds after their two week apprenticeships, or found their passion. Students must do another apprenticeship in their last year of high school. I could not find a comparable educational requirement in American schools. Additionally, on my correspondent's online campus where she looked at her grades, there was a database of possible career options that she was well prepared for. Also, at every high school in France, there is an educational counselor, much like schools here. However, at Lycee Marie Curie, there were required meetings with the counselor for each student once a semester when they discussed possible career options.

There were also public resources for career choice and post-secondary education outside of school. We visited a CIO (Center of Information and Orientation), where French people of all ages can obtain information about job selection and higher education for free. In the CIO there are dozens of books and pamphlets on every career imaginable, as well as counselors who will sit down with people and explain and plan with them. When I spoke with an employee at the CIO, she told me that most of their clients at the CIO are people who dropped out of high school and therefore have no Baccalaureate to qualify them for positions, and people unsuccessful in their fields who wish to make a diametric career change.

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I worried that students would change their mind when they were in high school, no matter how sure they were at fifteen. French students assured me that juniors in high school were still allowed to change their program. I met students who were not particularly passionate about the program they chose, but they knew it would give them the most options they favoured later in life. There was a distinct lack of the panic I expected; the kids were confident that they chose a general field they enjoy and they could change the specific job later if they wanted. I believe that part of this ease was the lack of the American ideal of absolute freedom. The idea of never theoretically being able to become a doctor just because of the curriculum I chose in high school felt unjust and unfair in my mind, even though I have no desire to become a doctor. In the American system, the most absurd of options are still just as available to me as anyone else when I graduate high school. The idea of having the freedom to choose anything is central to the ideals of the United States education system, as evidenced by the general education requirements to an undergraduate degree, (as well as the existence of an undergraduate degree.) It is important to create “well-rounded” students who could theoretically do anything.

In contrast, the French education system streamlines students into studies younger and with more ease. This may seem wrong to an American, but there is one thing that is

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essential to this discussion that I would be remiss to ignore; due to the diversity of programs, streamlining of interests, and intensity and difficulty of certain paths, French education can be free. In France, higher education is a right for all French people. Some programs cost a few hundred euros a year for books or supplies, but the idea of paying tuition for education is completely foreign for French people. While explaining our tuition system, I realized that what I saw as absolute freedom was in truth only absolute freedom for the wealthy. None of our higher education options are free, and very few are affordable. These people seemingly sacrificed a few of the absolute freedoms that we hold in order to gain free access to education for all.

The French system is not perfect. I spoke to students who did agree that they had to choose their Baccalaureate too early. Some of them were no longer interested in the curriculum they chose and wish they had an opportunity for a generalized education like in the United States. Many people in France think that the Professional program in particular fails to prepare students for career changes. FACS are overcrowded, and to counter it President Macron is instituting some of the first merit based attendance prioritization systems in France. Some fields have been oversaturated with different licenses and degrees without standardized qualifications. But regardless of all of those issues, what I found in France was a completely different education system that has

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solved many issues we still fight. I could pick a fraction of the French system to implement here it would revolutionize the American system.

When I discussed education with French kids, they were as ignorant of my schooling as I was of theirs. But during our discussions, we would each notice aspects that we like of the other's education system. In ten minute conversations, we would propose dozens of possible changes.

The first aspect of French education I would implement here is the respect of a high school diploma as a certificate of specific qualification in a certain field. In the United States, a high school diploma is a certificate of accomplishment, proving to have endured the same general education as their peers. French high school is far more specialized, but also more strenuous, and therefore socially respected as a license that is difficult to obtain. If an American high schooler chooses to enter the workforce directly after high school, they are choosing to be an unskilled and therefore low-paid worker. If a French high schooler chooses to enter the workforce after high school, they might not be the highest paid worker, but they will nevertheless be regarded as a skilled laborer and have more access to benefits, workers unions, and job security. Implementing

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specialization into American schools, like university majors, would be a simple change to give our students more options, and more credibility in the workforce.

Another alteration I would propose would be teacher education. In France, in order to teach high school, a teacher must have a masters degree in their FACS program. Due to this high education requirement (as well as social value on education) high school teachers are paid comparably to American university professors. Highly paid, highly qualified teachers increase the quality of education and better prepare students for post-secondary education.

In the United States, sixty six percent of high school graduates attend university. This oversaturation of university is causing university degrees to become commonplace, as well as burdening students with nearly insurmountable debt. Two aspects of French higher education counter this problem: realistic, high-paying options outside of university, and more demanding studies in university. We have vocational schools in the United States, but they are not nearly as well funded or structured, and there are fewer schools and fewer programs within those schools. Additionally, in the United States there is a hierarchy, with traditional university as the most esteemed path. In the United States,

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if we could simultaneously increase the difficulty in university studies and create and fund other opportunities, we could lower attendance without hurting students.

These are only the basics of a few changes we could make. I want to go into politics one day, and now I have a foundation of innovative ideas to change our higher education, which is one of the most monumental problems facing our nation. In France, I learned that our broken, expensive, unfair higher education system is not past saving. Other nations are doing things completely differently and through communication, we can find educational solutions. At the core, I learned in France that through cultural sharing, travelling, and international dialogue, we can better our nations and we can better the world.