

**Annual Study Center Review  
CIEE Study Center at Vesalius College  
Brussels, Belgium  
2008**

CIEE Program Director: Catharine Scruggs, Program Director, Western Europe  
CIEE Resident Director: Michaelangelo van Meerten  
CIEE Academic Consortium Board Program Evaluation: [www.ciee.org](http://www.ciee.org)  
CIEE Academic Consortium Board Monitor: Nancy Kanach, Princeton University

Each summer, program directors write a Study Center Review for each CIEE Study Center program commenting on the previous academic year. The program director writes the review based on input from the CIEE Academic Consortium Board members, resident directors, sending institutions, and student evaluations. Each report is made public on the CIEE website at [www.ciee.org](http://www.ciee.org).

### **Program Goals**

The program has three goals: to provide opportunities to study European identity, culture, and policy-making from a non-U.S. perspective with other international students; to offer insights into Belgium and Brussels' unique political, cultural and linguistic situation in Europe; and to enable students to improve their French or Dutch language skills.

Overall, the first two goals for the program were met in the 2007-08 academic year. There continue to be challenges related to student satisfaction with language learning.

### **New and Noteworthy Features**

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#### **Academic Features**

##### **French and Dutch Language**

##### **Community Language Commitment**

There is no community language commitment in Brussels. Students are encouraged to use and practice French and / or Dutch through cultural activities, direct enrolment in the French- or Dutch speaking universities of Brussels for students with an advanced level in these languages, and French conversation dinners.

In fall 2007 a new feature of French-English conversation tables was initiated under the supervision of a language professor from the host institution. Though interest from CIEE students was relatively high, it turned out to be somewhat harder to get local French speaking students. Overall the experience was good and will be repeated in the coming year. During both semesters, a weekly film, offered the possibility to see non-English language films in French or with French subtitles. Several French dinners were organized.

The changes of staff and methods in the language classes at the host institution seem to be yielding positive results. The new professor for conversational French is definitely working on improving the conversational beginning language courses.

## **Subject Area Courses**

### **CIEE courses**

The only CIEE course in the Brussels program is the core course, "Belgium, the European Experience". The content and guest-speakers list for this course are constantly updated to keep in line with new developments, as well as with student evaluations of speakers, visits and material. A new item in the course was the short student presentations on course readings. Students also present a news item related to Belgium. The reader was further streamlined to include more recent developments. Students' appraisal of the course and their involvement has improved. The large student number in spring required splitting the core course in two separate groups for one of the two weekly meetings. This seems to have a positive effect on the course and course participation.

### **Direct Enrollment courses**

With the exception of the core course, most of the courses the students take are direct enrollment, in English, at Vesalius College. Seven students in fall and eight students in spring took one or two direct enrollment courses in French at the French-speaking Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB). Though a specific and well-attended info session is organized for direct enrollment at ULB, not all interested students do end up taking a direct enrollment course. This is largely due to the difference in academic system (only one, mostly oral, final exam, no continuous assessment), academic calendar (courses start later and exams may take place late), and the fact that students are already entrenched in their course schedule and / or internships when the direct enrollment courses start.

The pilot program that CIEE has run with Georgetown University at ULB for the past few semesters and which will become a formalized program in spring 2009, certainly contributed in a positive way to motivate more students on the regular program to take a direct enrollment course.

### **Out-of-classroom activities**

The core course has a number of field trips, including introducing the students to the Belgian federal Parliament, and the Fine Arts Museum. The general excursions also include visits to cultural and historical sites that are highlighted in the core course. Several Vesalius classes (art, politics) also have out of class activities.

## **Non-Academic Features**

### **CIEE Orientation**

Activities during orientation have further been shortened and diversified, particularly on the first day of arrival. There seems to be an increasing number of students that arrive the day before the official start of orientation. This has a positive effect in overcoming jet lag. Changes in the orientation conducted by the host institution have reduced overlapping and shortened sessions. This is also a positive evolution. Problems with staffing and logistics mean that students perceive this part of orientation as somewhat chaotic.

### **Cultural Activities/Field Trips**

In fall the CIEE program offered a weekly film series, a soccer match with the Belgian national team, Thanksgiving dinner with students preparing and cooking dishes, a full day field trip to Waterloo and the Villers-la-Ville abbey complex, a full day field trip Bruges (with a guided tour of the historical city and bike tour), a field trip to NATO headquarters in Brussels, a full day kayak event in the Ardennes (descent of the Lesse river by kayak), a full day field

trip to the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in The Hague, the Mauritshuis museum and Delft (Netherlands), an after mid-term dinner, a full day field trip to the European Investment Bank in Luxembourg, visit of Luxembourg city and Vêves castle, dinner at a local Ardennes restaurant, a full day field trip to Ypres and surrounding First World War battlefields, a full day field trip to Monschau and Aachen (Germany), traditional Christmas markets and visit to Charlemagne's tomb and throne in Aachen cathedral. Students were again very positive about the field trips and activities, often they indicate that this was one of the best aspects of the program allowing them to get to Belgian places, experience traditions and visit cultural venues they would not have discovered otherwise. The program strikes the right balance between more educational aspects (museums, institutions and the like) and more 'fun' aspects (kayaking, dinners, bike riding).

In the spring the CIEE program again offered the weekly film series, the soccer match, a morning field trip to the Comic strip museum in Brussels, a full day field trip to Bastogne and battle of the Bulge, a field trip to NATO headquarters in Brussels, a field trip to the carnival recognized by UNESCO as cultural heritage of humankind at Binche, a full day field trip to the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in The Hague, the Mauritshuis museum and Delft (Netherlands), a full day field trip Bruges (guided tour and bike tour), an evening visit of the Royal greenhouses in Brussels. Students were equally enthusiastic in spring.

### **Field trips**

In fall, the program participated on a three-day visit to Normandy: Mont St.-Michel, Bayeux and D-Day landing beaches. Students again cited the Normandy trip as the most impressive experience of the program.

In spring, the program participated on a two-day visit to the European Court of Justice, Luxembourg city, and Vêves castle and a three day visit to Alsace (Eastern France) and Germany, visits to Strasbourg, haut Koenigsbourg castle, Riquewihir, Freiburg and Trier. The success of the visit to the European Court of Justice largely depends on the case students are able to attend during their visit. This spring the case bore upon a dispute between the EU Commission and France. It highlighted the effects of European integration and the working of EU institutions. Students very much appreciated both visits.

### **Housing**

In fall twenty-nine percent of the students stayed with host families, one student stayed with relatives and the remaining 71% had independent arrangements organized by CIEE, sharing an apartment, floor or house with landlords, local students or other students of the program.

In spring, ten percent stayed with host families, and the remainder (83%) had independent CIEE organized set-ups. The homestay option seems to have become less popular over time.

It usually takes some of the students a bit of time to adapt to the city and the fact that commuting using public transportation is a normal feature of daily life. The program tries to meet students' individual preferences (in terms of set-up, language exposure, etc.) as best as is possible, but it does occur that the fit isn't entirely satisfactory. In the fall there was one student who was moved in the first week of her stay to a different set-up that indeed better fit her needs and preferences. In spring one student found that she no longer fit in the homestay family she initially had chosen. An independent set-up was found for her.

The imbalance of student numbers between the semesters created the challenge of holding on to good housing and finding sufficient new places. The same holds for changes in the number of homestays and the number of students who indicate they want to live in a French-speaking environment.

## **Community Engagement and Integration**

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### **For-Credit Internship and Community Service Options**

Vesalius College provides the opportunity of non paid for-credit internships. Occasionally students have their own contacts and an internship is set up through CIEE. In the fall semester, eight students took an internship at an international institution, non-governmental organization, communications or international business. Only a very small number of students who applied for an internship didn't get one. In general students really appreciated their internships describing them as one of their best (learning) experiences during their stay. In the spring, six students undertook an internship. Competition for internships and fewer positions meant that fewer spring students obtained an internship than in previous semesters.

In spring 2007 Vesalius started a new procedure for internships, requiring the reception of resumes and cover letters prior to the students' arrival. There is also more academic monitoring and letter grades. The past two semesters also saw change in staff. New internships have been added and electronic information is more readily accessible. The future outlook of the internship program seems good.

### **Not-for-Credit Community Service/Volunteer Projects**

There is the possibility of community service projects. In both fall and spring a few students initially showed interest. But the commitment and time frame eventually resulted in there being no students who did a community service project. One student did a volunteering job helping out archiving and filing in the CIEE office.

## **Challenges and Future Directions**

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### **Academic**

#### **Language**

As always there are some students who are not interested in the language aspect of the program. This is further hindered by the international character of the city that allows students to get by in English rather than using French.

The new professor for beginning and conversational French has improved students appreciation of the beginning and conversational French courses. The challenge will be to also get a better appreciation for the more advanced French classes.

Vesalius College offers a second session of a course if there is a high demand from students. The past year saw a rise in interest for beginning levels of Dutch courses. In fall students took this level at the language institute related to Vrije Universiteit Brussels (VUB). In the future, Vesalius will organize and guarantee beginning Dutch language levels in both fall and spring. Two fall students who had more than beginning Dutch were not able to be placed appropriately as their level was not high enough for Vesalius College's Level 2. In the future, CIEE will offer private tutoring to students in this situation.

### **CIEE Course**

It seems that splitting the course into two sections in the spring gave it the success the Resident Director has been seeking. Though splitting one of the two weekly course meetings is a solution for larger student numbers, it does bring a challenge for guest speakers.

### **Direct Enrollment**

The overwhelming majority of classes are direct enrollment, either at Vesalius College in English or at the Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB) in French or the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB) in Dutch or English.

CIEE staff continued to direct students towards classes that got positive evaluations and directed them away from classes with less positive feedback, while simultaneously working with the host institution on improving these courses and/or changing professors. In the evaluations of individual courses students tend to be more positive than in their overall evaluation of courses. Generally students say they have to do a lot of work (long papers, presentations etc) but that the work isn't always challenging. Changing set ways at the host institution necessarily will take a long time but the changes that take place seem to go in the right direction.

Registration for direct enrollment at ULB is relatively complex and requires motivated students. It is, however, part of discovering the host culture. The new contacts at ULB related to the new pilot program there definitely are a potential help. Also the experience with the new program and the feedback from the student are likely to have positive effects on direct enrollment and institutional relations.

### **Non-Academic**

Generally group dynamics among students of the group are very good. Orientation, activities and field trips create positive dynamics and many students stay in touch after the program's end. The Resident Coordinator has been attracting increasing numbers of alumni at informal annual meetings in the U.S. during winter break. The refurbished computer lab at Vesalius has improved access to printing facilities and to internet. Practically all housing has wireless access allowing students to hook up to internet with their laptops.

Finding shared housing with local (francophone) students that meets our quality standards turns out to be difficult.

Integration in the community continues to be a challenge. Generally students who stay the full academic year take advantage of the many opportunities to get in touch with the Brussels communities. Semester students tend to be less successful in doing that. The goals meetings and the French-English conversation tables seem to improve the contacts with locals.

### **Future Directions**

The Resident Director will focus on working with the host institution to improve the evaluation of classes in general.

Particular emphasis will be made on encouraging students to take either an internship or to direct enroll as a partial solution to the integration issue. At the same time, resident staff will continue to work on setting up activities with locals.