

'New school of thought' in French abbey

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Relations between France and the United States have at times been strained, but this is hardly the case at a two-year-old international study center in a majestic 1,000-year-old abbey in the heart of the Loire Valley.

The College of International and Continuing Education of the University of Southern Mississippi was taking a risk when it set up the European-American Center for International Education at the former Benedictine abbey and college in the village of Pontlevoy, near Blois.

Integrated approach

Initially, the project was greeted with skepticism, if not outright opposition, but when the time came, it was welcomed by the 1,700 local inhabitants, says Pontlevoy's mayor, Christian Goemaere. The young people have now become an integral part of village life. College fees include meals in local bistros, and some of students are teaching in local public schools.

The American owners bought the abbey for about \$1 million, helping to preserve a part of France's heritage, and have spent \$3 million on renovations and operating costs, half funded by the local authorities. The program's director, Doug Mackaman, says this is the largest subsidy the French government has ever granted to a U.S. educational institution.

Flagged as "a new school of thought," the center admits students for one term to what Mackaman describes as a "new model in international education." For the first five years, the honors-level courses are focusing on interdisciplinary tuition in the arts and humanities. French language is optional, but all students are taking it.

New to the curriculum this year are violin master classes, with 25 South Koreans among the participants, and a theater program for both native English and French speakers. The center, which is involved in the summer Pontlevoy music festival, could ultimately become a "point of exchange between scholars, researchers, and political and economic leaders," says Mackaman.

The student intake so far has totaled up to 45, except for autumn 2003, when there was no program because of fallout from the Iraq war. Among the February arrivals are 25 freshmen and sophomores. "This is the only study-abroad program of any dimension run by an American university that admits students at such an early stage in their university career," says Mackaman.

The students and faculty are not exclusively American, however. A consortium run by the University of Southern Mississippi has sent students from Britain, Cameroon, Greece and Japan, as well as professors from France and the Netherlands.