Russo, Laura: A comparison of The United States and France secondary education and its' affect on adolescent culture.

1. Research Proposal

For my research study, I plan on to compare America and France's secondary education system and its' impact on young adult culture. The United States has an extremely popular route that many could say is "the norm;" graduate from general high school, attend a four year college and obtain a Bachelor's degree. According to France's national statistics agency, France's high school dropout rate is triple that of the United States, but there is a reason for this; France strongly encourages vocational schools. Culturally speaking, extracurricular activities are not offered by schools, health classes are practically nonexistent and parents stay out of students academic affairs. All these factors affect how French students grow and how they tend to leave their homes earlier than American students do.

I would love to ask the same survey to American and French students. I am a dual citizen and spend my summers in France so I have access to native French students. I would like to interview French professors, American students, French exchange students and a French native like my mother. I will review Karl Heider's attributes for a successful ethnographic film prior to filming as well as support my finding through reading various scholarly works. (Heider 1976:47-96).

SURVEY QUESTIONS:

How important is a college degree for success?

When you hear the word"success" what is the first term that comes to mind?

What do you like/dislike America/France's academic system?

What are your plans after receiving your diploma?

What percent of American students do you believe are unemployed after college?

How do you stay informed about national or world news?

How are you financing your education?

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SURVEY RESULTS: Based on results of 100 SUNY Geneseo students and 100 French college students of Universite de Monpellier, France. I think it would be more logical to have these follow your Scholarly Background section.
1. How important is a college degree for success?

80 percent of French students said college education was "somewhat important" for success compared to 17 percent of American students.

When you hear the word "success" what is the first term that comes to mind?

France's results were similar to American students, however, the answer "career goals" resulted in a slightly higher percentage than French students.

What do you like/dislike about the American college system?

80 percent of the 100 French students did not respond to this question, however the few that did answered extremely appealing and fun part of the American college life. Students answered American universities are "the dream," and they associate American universities with "greek life," and "athletics." No one mentioned the cost of education.
What are your plans after receiving your diploma?

- Volunteer (Peace Corps, WorldTeach, etc.)
- Take a gap year (Live at home, travel, etc.)
- Work, then higher education
- Career related job
- Higher education

Similar responses however 0% of students go on to volunteer or take a gap year after receiving their diploma compared to the 10 percent of American students that plan on doing so.

What percent of American college students do you believe are unemployed after receiving a bachelors degree?

- 51-70%
- less than 10%
- 10-30%
- 31-50%

American students seem unsure for this answer. 43% answered 10-30% of undergraduates are unemployed, and 45% answered 30-50% of students were unemployed after college.
Do you know anyone that has attended any of these trade schools? Check all that apply.

How do you stay informed about national or world news?

** 0 % of students partake in discussions with friends, family or colleagues regarding world news.

** 0 % of students partake in discussions with friends, family or colleagues regarding world news.
1. How are you financing your education?

Notice 0% of French students take out loans to finance their education, and similarly appx. 75% of American and French students rely on their parents savings.

Survey Analysis: I found the results of the survey to be extremely fascinating. Where I found the biggest differences between French and American youth is the difference in estimates about the percentage of American college students that are unemployed after graduating. The majority of French students estimated less than 20 percent of college students are unemployed after college, however the answers of American students were all over the place.

These results demonstrate that American college students do not even know themselves the chances of unemployment after undergraduate education and that the United States college system is over glorified in countries around the world. Well, that is debatable. US universities are, overall, the most respected on earth. So, arguing for "over glorification" sounds more like a value judgement than a fact here.

Another crucial distinction in the survey results is that 80% of French students believed college was "somewhat important" compared to 17% of American students that chose that answer. This answer exemplifies the message I am trying to send in my film and research study: college education is overemphasized in the United States and many European countries respect trade skills that diminish the value of college education.

Scholarly Background:

The "college-for-all" standard in America, although well-intentioned, "encourages low achieving adolescents to develop unrealistically high expectations" and is contributing to the national shortage of vocational workers (Gardner and Martin 2015: 108; Nwoke and Wilkin 2007; Rosenbaum 1997).

Vocational and technical education that is available to young Americans is "underfunded and inadequate, and too often denigrated as being for "losers" (Huffington Post, 22 March 2015). European countries, particularly France, have educational systems that allow students opportunities starting at age fourteen to choose profitable technical careers that are still well-respected, and needed (Bouder and Kirsch 2007:508).

America's education system is a straight and general path until senior year of high school. Students face the college admission process during their senior year, which one could say depends entirely on high school performance and standardized test results, and very few choose vocational studies (Garnier and Hout 1976: 231). In France, the age of fourteen marks the first division between the academically successful and those who might prefer technical education. Performance in middle school is the only "evidence of academic potential prior to curriculum placement" that occurs following the national exit exam in eighth grade, "Le Brevet des Colleges" (Felouzis and Perroton 2011). After completion of the Brevet, it is decided whether "the pupil can be recommended for promotion" to higher education, or continue in specialized skills like plumbing, culinary arts, construction, and baker, to name a few. (Dundas-Grant 1985: 259,262).

Students who pursue high school education select one of three concentrations that narrow down their career paths, at age fourteen: "E" or economics, "L" or literature and "S" or scientific "the most rigorous" option according to Goldhammer (2010:105) (Kerckoff 1979:7). This is different from America's education system which sees high school as an "essential place for a core of common studies" (Bennett and Wilezol 2013: 363). Upon completing the four year track, French students are required to take pass an extremely difficult exam, called the Baccalaureat, in order to receive their high school diploma (Bishop 2016). In 1945, high school diplomas in France "remained the province of an intellectual elite, held by only three percent of all teenagers," but the percentage of students that pass the Baccalaureat, "rose from 40% in 1986 to 68% in 1996" and 87.9 percent in 2014 (Duru-Bellat 2000: 33; France 24 news, 11 July 2014; New York Times, 27 June 2013). The United States does not have an exit exam, and instead awards diplomas to students who pass the general common core requirements of high school with average grades (Cornett-DeVito 2005:90, Hofstede 2001: 235).
The general education requirements of secondary and post secondary institutions in the United States "prepares students for a world that can change rapidly and quite unpredictably," although co-existing with expensive "tuition, stagnant grant aid, strapped family budgets and college loans" (Dwyer et al. 2012: 1133; Most and Wellmon 2015: 115). France however, encourages vocational training and apprenticeships for the non-academic to prepare for workforce in the labor market. Apprenticeships and specific training can be "more cost effective for individuals who expect to spend their lives in the same place and in the same industry and occupation," which is the accepted view of the working class in France (Garnier and Hout 1976: 229; Malamud and Pop-Eleches 2010: 44). Even though America overall does not encourage vocational schools, some educational institutions like the University of Minnesota’s Ramp up to Readiness program creates a "sustainable approach: for postsecondary education, beginning in middle school. The program discourages the "four-year college education for all" ethos and defines "postsecondary education to include technical programs" (Bruininks et al. 2010: 119). In a country where seventy percent of college students graduate with debt, these programs encourage students to work and apprentice at the same time which results in earlier annual salaries and more affordable tuition bills (The Christian Century 2016; Oreopoulos and Potemler 2013:99). According to Monks (2014), around 55 percent of public undergraduates graduated with at least twenty-two thousand dollars in debt.

Culture is tied to a lot of the educational differences seen in France and the United States. The French educational system has "limited access to higher education" meaning students can not move on to college unless successfully passing the exit exam (Besancon et al. 2015:179; Garnier and Hout 229). In America, there is a college for everyone; poor academically performing students have an opportunity to succeed through community colleges, which do not exist in France. There are also "closed professions" in the french labor market, where "governments or professional associations erect systematic barriers to the attainment of the credentials necessary to obtain or practice a skill" and thus gives trade professions respect and a valuable reputation that is not seen in America (Weeden 2002: 59). The organization of some skilled professions in the U.S. allow people in the United States to show up with a paintbrush and business card and claim to be a "professional house painter" The level of professionalism of trade skills in the United States is weak in comparison to European culture; The empirical value of college education is engrained in American students at a young age, due to the format of the American educational system.

I think your excellent graphs and survey findings would make more sense here.

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Loaded With Deb: Making College Affordable is a public good
The ethnographic process of creating my short documentary was free flowing and overall, successful. There was always another idea that jumped at me during the day and I felt overwhelmingly accomplished due to the duration of the assignment. Being French, I had a deep understanding and passion for my topic which made the process enjoyable. I thought creating a strict interview film tied well with the academic nature of my study and pool of participants, professors and a businesswoman. I thoroughly researched how to avoid bias in the interview questions, since I had a clear message I attempted to get across. I wanted to avoid Edmond’s claim how we often pose “questions in such a way we are really trying to make the beginning and the end of a process equal and identical” and that a basic human need is to “organize” (Edmonds 1974:23). I defeated this statement by asking simple open-ended questions with an emotionless face and let the participants speak freely, whom often digressing from the initial question. I deviated from my initial proposal after the results of my first interview. Instead of comparing both the American and French sides of education, I chose to only do the French, since we are already immersed in the American perspective.

I restricted movement of the camera to decrease distraction and emphasize the importance of the commentators’ words. This is also why I opted to remove myself from being on camera and used words on the screen instead of my voice, being reading is more effective than listening to a primitive iPhone camera. I chose simple and relatable pictures to visually represent what kind of professions the participants were discussing and to provide a break from the academic statistics.

My film incorporated elements from the expository and interactive documentary styles. These were most effective in giving “the impression of objectivity and well-sustained judgment.” I wanted to evoke my points in a concise and empathetic manner, in which “each text contributes to this stockpile of knowledge is new content, a new field of attention to which familiar concepts and categories can be applied (Nichols 1991: 35).”

The results of my research and survey supported the message of my film. There are clear distinctions between what French and American students opinions of college. I wanted to incorporate the survey results into the film, however, due to the over estimated amount of footage I received, I decided to discuss it on the wiki instead.

The decision to conduct numerous sit down interactive interviews required me to form a bond with my participants, to get them to trust my intellectual capabilities since some were wary about being on the infamous YouTube. I’d say I succeeded since I had over an hour and fifteen minutes of footage to trim down. I formed wonderful relationships with the two French professors and I reflect on this project as an overwhelmingly wonderful experience.

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