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## Passport to Colby: When students start Colby with a semester abroad, they arrive on Mayflower Hill with a different perspective

Ruth Jacobs  
*Colby College*

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# Passport to Colby



# *When students start Colby with a semester abroad, they arrive on Mayflower Hill with a different perspective*

Story by Ruth Jacobs



Photos by Christopher Grant

As John Lewallen waited to hear which colleges accepted him, he knew that rejections come in small envelopes, and acceptances in big, fat ones. So when he first spotted the mail from Colby, he knew he was in.

"I was really excited to get a big envelope," he said.

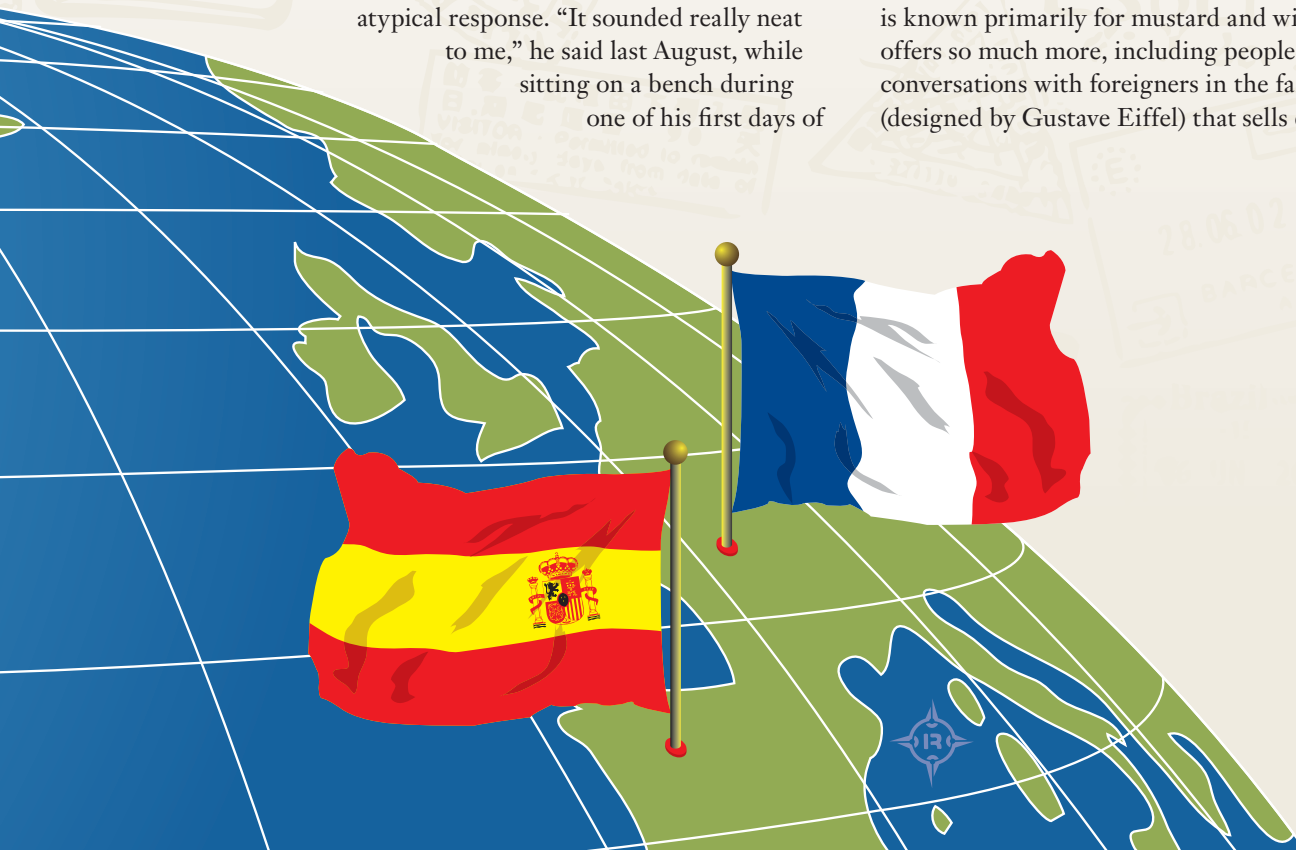
What came next surprised him. Yes, it was an acceptance to Colby's Class of 2010. But the letter offered him a place on Mayflower Hill as of January, not August. For the first semester he could choose to attend a study-abroad program in Dijon, France.

To this atypical acceptance, Lewallen had an atypical response. "It sounded really neat to me," he said last August, while sitting on a bench during one of his first days of

college—at L'Université de Bourgogne.

As the semester progressed, Lewallen found he'd made the right choice. In fact, he was sad to leave France, he said from back home in Portland, Oregon, where his French host sister was about to visit this summer. "I really loved the independence of the whole trip, and the Colby program made it feel like I was independent but at the same time I was not by myself, I was with a group," he said. "It was perfect for me."

Most visitors would understand the appeal. This city of 150,000, less than two hours from Paris via high-speed train, has the attractions of a city while maintaining the qualities of a small town. The capital of Burgundy, Dijon is known primarily for mustard and wine. But the city offers so much more, including people who will spark conversations with foreigners in the farmers' market (designed by Gustave Eiffel) that sells everything from





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peches de vigne (peaches that grow only in vineyards) to locally made Brie and Camembert. A walk through Dijon, even on a drizzly day in August when the gray sky blends with the beige stone buildings to create an almost colorless landscape, is certain to yield at least one manicured park and a bakery selling fluffy miniature quiches Lorraine.

New construction is mainly on the outskirts of Dijon, and the city center (“centre ville”) is marked by centuries-old buildings, pedestrian-only streets, and the gothic Notre Dame church dating back to the 13th century, complete with gargoyles. Dijon does not lack a modern flair, however, and would not disappoint shoppers

seeking chic boutiques and open-air plazas for outdoor dining.

Dijon may have been perfect for Lewallen, but not for everyone accepted into the program—at least at first. About half drop Colby as an option after they get those letters. Others decide (or their parents convince them) that it’s worth sacrificing a “normal” freshman experience to go to Colby, which for many is their first choice and/or their best option. Almost all, once they get to Europe, make the best of it, and upon reflection months later say they’d do it again. “Those who make the leap ... at the end of the programs feel as though it was a good decision and it was worthwhile,” said Dean of Admissions and Financial Aid Parker Beverage. “Having said all of that, of course there is still that inevitable, ‘Ugh, jeez, I’ve been admitted for midyear, I don’t know whether I want to do that, it’s not what I was expecting, it’s not the way I want to start college.’”

Some students worry that when they arrive at Colby in January everyone will have made their friends and won’t be looking for more. They are anxious about not knowing anything about campus when their classmates already are acclimated. Ultimately, they just want to be at Colby.

But thousands of miles from Waterville last August, strolling atop the rampart in the nearby town of Beaune, Alex Haskell '10 explained how she approached the disappointing news. “I figured being forced to spend three and a half months in France was a small price to pay,” she said, passing by one of many roofs made of glazed clay tiles arranged into patterns. “I felt like this is an acceptance to my first-choice school and, even if it’s a roundabout way, I felt [it] was worth it.”

So why the “roundabout” path to Colby? The College instituted



## Coming Home By Mindy Favreau '07

Amy Pendoley '08J knew living in Spain for a year would be hard. She grew up in Thornton, N.H., population 2,000, and had never traveled outside the country—not even to Canada. But, after spending a year studying in Salamanca, she was surprised when coming back to the U.S. proved even harder.

“I expected going to Spain would be a major culture shock, but the truth of the matter is that, after a year of living [in Spain] and more or less establishing a life in Salamanca, it was even more of a shock to come home,” she said.



To read the rest of this story  
go to [www.colby.mag](http://www.colby.mag), keyword *dijon*.



*Opposite page: Chelsea Nabill '10 (left) and Aimee Sheppard '10 on the first day of college at L'Université de Bourgogne. Above: Beth Ponsot '10 and Eliza Cohen '10 check out photos they've just taken at Place de la Libération, a Dijon landmark.*

the program for first-year students to study abroad in the 1985 to address a financial issue, according to Beverage, who did not work at Colby at the time. More juniors were choosing to study abroad in the spring semester, which caused an enrollment imbalance. To make the best use of resources, Colby instituted this program, which was—and still is—unusual among peer institutions. “I wasn’t a believer when I came [to Colby in 1985],” said Beverage. “It took me a while to become a believer.”

One of the struggles involves explaining to students and parents why an applicant received this nontraditional acceptance. “Many of them look at it as sort of a back-door entry or second-class citizenship,” Beverage said, but he argues that they should not see it that way. “Usually they’re kids who present pretty compelling cases from a personal standpoint and we want very much to enroll them at Colby. We know that they’ll do okay academically here,” he said, stressing that these students often bring strengths that will make

them valuable campus citizens. Colby has opened the program to regular admits who prefer to start in Europe, if there’s room—an option a handful of students take each year, according to Beverage.

The College also tries to choose students for these programs whose profiles indicate that they will make the most of an abroad experience. “You tend to put people in there ... who have a level of maturity, maybe have traveled, maybe have done an overseas program, have the independence to go on one of these programs and acquit themselves well,” said Beverage. Colby also expects that these students will respect and, ideally, embrace the cultural differences—a major focus of the programs. “Part of the experience here is to be in another part of the world where things are completely different,” said Javier Gonzales, resident director of Colby in Salamanca, the sister program of Colby in Dijon. “They have to accept another type of reality.”

Despite their initial hesitation about the program, most students



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embrace the European experience and arrive excited about the months ahead. Katie Peterson '10 traveled from California, missed a connecting flight, arrived in Paris after the group had left in a chartered bus, had to find her way to Dijon alone with all her luggage—and still arrived at Colby's Dijon apartment with a huge smile. “That's why I love my job,” said Colby French Professor Jonathan Weiss, resident director in Dijon. “You get these students who are so enthusiastic and happy to be here.”

Chelsea Nahill, one of 19 Colby students in Dijon last year, saw France as an adventure. “It kind of feels like one of those once-in-a-lifetime opportunities that you just have to take,” she said while dining outdoors at La Mère Folle (“Crazy Mother”), where, wanting to immerse herself in everything French, the then-17-year-old tasted foie gras for the first time.

Weiss works hard to prepare students for what they are likely to experience. Standing in the living room of Colby's 17th-century apartment in the heart of the city on the students' first day in Dijon last August, Weiss introduced the group to some of the cultural differences. And there are many. “I try to understand everything from the inside without first evaluating,” he said, encouraging them to do the same.

Since the students live with families—“to give them an entry into French life,” according to Weiss—he begins with that transition. Circled around the room, facing the tall windows that overlook courtyard, some students look bewildered, some enthusiastic, some both. “Let's get to one of the most tension-producing areas for you. That's the homestay,” Weiss said. The French don't eat much for breakfast. Hot chocolate, coffee—maybe a croissant. If you'd like a hard-boiled egg, he said, ask for it.

After a detailed account of differences in eating habits, Weiss moved on to etiquette. “Every society thinks that others are rude simply because they don't understand what the rules are,” he said.

The kiss? “It's the same as saying ‘hi.’ There's no difference,”



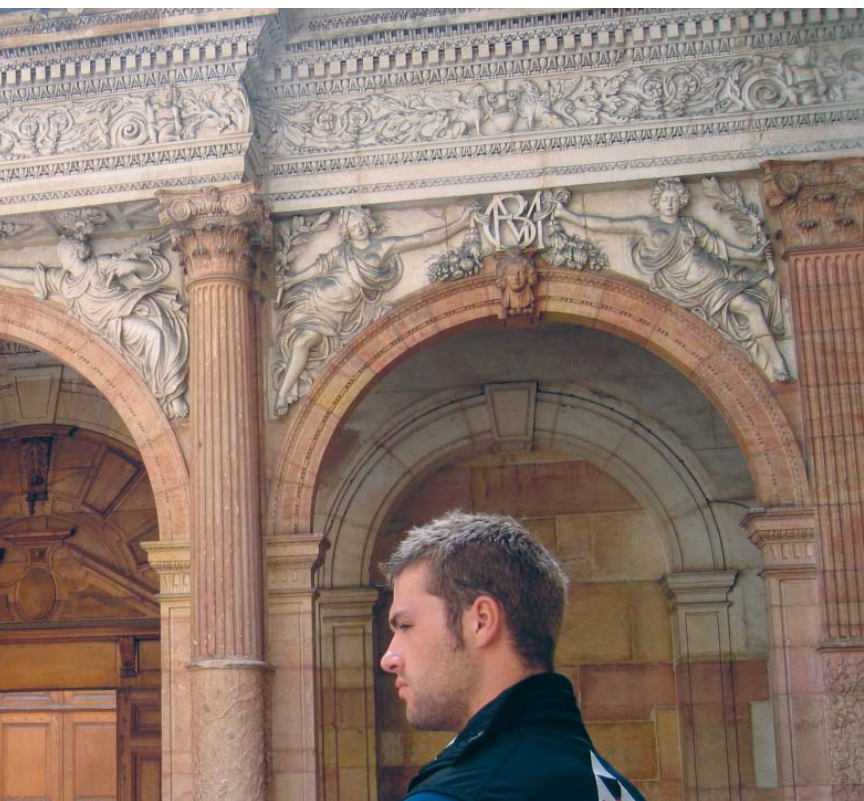
*Above, foreground: Professor Jonathan Weiss guides the students through a tour of Dijon. Students pictured left to right: Peter Stone '10, Thomas Tessier '10, John Lewallen '10, and Alex Haskell '10. Right: Austin Scholl '10 checks out a historic Dijon building.*

said Weiss. “What would be a little suggestive would be a hug.”

Along with the physical greeting, always say “bonjour” and “au revoir” (hello and goodbye), he said. When you walk into a store, say bonjour. When you leave, say au revoir. “Always ‘bonjour,’ ‘au revoir,’ ‘bonjour,’ ‘au revoir’—that's the least level of politeness in France. If you want to add to that, ‘bonjour, monsieur,’ ‘bonjour, madame,’ then you're really polite.” The French are more formal than Americans, Weiss explained.

Then he warned students of differences they might find annoying. “You have to deal with dog crap. French people love to let their dogs do it on the street,” he said. They park their cars on the sidewalk, he continued. The bus drivers go on strike. People smoke just about everywhere. But he encouraged the students to





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Colby French Professor,  
Dijon resident director

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be accepting. “Learning a language can just be in your head ... but to learn to live in a country, to understand it from the inside, that takes heart,” he said.

During a break from this orientation session, groups of students walked around the city in the rain to explore and get lunch. Some ordered baguette sandwiches from an open-air sidewalk shop. Others went straight to buy their cell phones. One student, eager to start writing in a journal, searched in various stores for the right blank book. As she and her new friends walked into store after store, they made sure to say “Bonjour.”

While students have the option to study in Dijon, France, or Salamanca, Spain, they can also choose not to attend a program and still start at Colby in January. Few choose this option, though, for two primary reasons. Students who successfully complete one of these programs earn a full semester’s credit, keeping them on track to graduate with their class. They also make Colby friends, so they can start on campus with a core group.

While in Europe, students take a regular course load that includes intensive language classes. In France, they take Contemporary France, which Professor Weiss teaches, French History and Civilization, and Art, which in 2006 included walking tours of the city to study local architecture. Weiss’s class is held at the dining-room table in the Colby apartment, housed in a 1697 building constructed as a home for a wealthy family. On the first day of class students discussed stereotypes Americans have about French people. Why? They brainstorm. France didn’t support the U.S. in the Iraq war. Americans might see the French as snobby, arrogant, or super-intellectual. Others see the French as elegant and cultured. The conversation turns to how politics and popular culture affect perceptions, from the war in Iraq to the infiltration of American culture in Europe—and anti-Americanism. They discuss examples of Americanization in Dijon: American music and television, the use of English words, and McDonald’s, which sits in



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the center of the city, surrounded by traditional French cafés.

In Dijon, the learning is constant, from language skills to cultural understanding. For Beth Ponsot '10, it meant going from being focused on an English major and a career in journalism to exploring new disciplines. “France completely changed my views on so many things,” she said. “Seeing how different the political world looks from an international perspective was fascinating.” Contemporary France class made her want to study sociology (she now is a government/French double major). “It made me realize that you can study things that are different. It doesn’t have to be what your best subject was in high school.”

The Colby programs also include weekend excursions. Last year the Dijon group traveled to the French Alps, the Loire Valley, and Paris, among other places. Beyond broadening students’ knowledge of France, these trips also gave them the chance to develop friendships.

Making friends, it turns out, is foremost on students’ minds. In Dijon, that happened naturally and quickly. Just four days into the trip they were posting photos of each other on Facebook. Pictures of them at the bus stop. At Flannery’s, an Irish pub. In front of Place de la Libération, a landmark building with fountains in the courtyard.

On the first day at the university, following a placement exam for their intensive French language course, a group of four took the bus to go to Monoprix, Dijon’s downtown version of a big-box store, complete with clothing, housewares, a lunch counter, groceries—and school supplies. So many things proved challenging, like how to ride the bus, which bus line to take, and even which notebooks to buy. “I should have just taken stuff from the U.S.,” one student said in frustration as she picked up one notebook after another. Ultimately they settled on graph paper notebooks (which French students use), and that task, which they felt would have been so easy at home, was finally complete. At least they had each other. And months after leaving, they still do. These four students, like the vast majority from Dijon and Salamanca, requested their “European” Colby friends as roommates for the spring semester.



*Caitlin  
Murphy '10  
and Sara  
Hersb '10  
stroll down a  
Dijon street  
last August.*





First-semester-abroad students, known by fellow students as “Feb Fresh,” know that arriving at Colby with a close group of friends will ease the transition. The notion proved true for last year’s French travelers. “We were all terribly, terribly close by the end,” said Haskell of her group. “When we got to campus that January, that continued, and we’re all very, very good friends.”

Although they had the comfort of their core groups, most felt the need to branch out and meet new people. “I think when we got to Colby everyone sort of wanted something different,” said Ponsot, who began working as an *Echo* reporter. For Tucker Gorman ’10, meeting new people was easy, in part because he felt other first-years were eager to meet the “new” students. “People were really, really nice, far more nice than I thought they’d be,” he said. They introduced themselves and asked about his experience in Salamanca. “They really made the transition easy and almost seamless.”

Good, for Gorman. But few others would call their transitions “seamless.” In fact, most say the transition to Colby was difficult—even harder than the transition to a foreign country. For John Lewallen, it lasted a week. For Alex Haskell, it lasted the whole semester.

In France, Haskell, who grew up primarily in downtown Boston, fell in love with the independence. “Just to be able to have the freedom to pick up the phone and make train reservations,” she said—to travel to places like Nice, France, and Venice, Italy, and Paris for a friend’s birthday, to be “immediately thrust into adulthood”—was thrilling. “I think that was the hardest thing to let go of coming back to campus.”

Year after year, Weiss has seen students struggle. “There’s a slight mitigation when they get [to Colby] in January,” he said. “There are problems. The campus is bleak in January, it’s not beautiful like it is in the fall,” he said. Fewer events take place during Jan Plan. There are fewer opportunities to meet people compared to the regular semester. This hit Haskell hard. “I felt extremely isolated and very, very bored,” she said. “Those feelings kind of stayed over into February and March and it was hard to shake that off.” This student who wanted Colby more than anything—and was willing to make the sacrifice of missing the traditional first-year experience in order to attend—is applying this fall to transfer to a big-city university.

Haskell, though, is in the minority. Data show that first-semester-abroad students at Colby have a higher four-year graduation rate than their conventional counterparts. “It was absolutely a very difficult transition,” said Ponsot, a Queens, N.Y., native. She kept comparing Colby to Dijon. Then she said to herself, “This is not New York, this is not Dijon, and you need to find what is wonderful about this place.” By mid-February, she said, she was adjusted, and by April she was happy. “Your adjustment is such a mix of factors,” she said. “It’s a factor of where you’re from, it’s a factor of what you want from school, and it’s a factor of how you approach the situation. If you just keep it positive, anyone can adjust.”

To Dijon. To Mayflower Hill. And in the process, these students learn a new way of seeing the world.