Crucible of Unity and Diversity

A small graduate institution trains the future leaders of the European Union

BY FRANCIS X. ROCCA

Bruges, Belgium

Greek students at the College of Europe here threw a party for their classmates recently, and conducted it on a nearby beach, with the North Sea filling in for the Aegean. To be out of bounds, Italian law in four towns from their country to cook a five-course meal for the whole student body. Austrian and Hungarian kept up a college tradition by jointly holding a formal ball that recalled the days of the Hapsburg empire. And the British and the Irish collaborating with their American and Canadian cousins to pay host to a "trans-Atlantic" affair, with costumes and decorations based on James Bond movies.

But no one would call the College of Europe a party school. At this small, elite graduate institution, the world's oldest and best known in the field of European studies, the students, all 274 of whom are fluent in at least two languages and typically know four or five, must take two full semesters of courses and write a master's thesis in little more than 10 months. A high proportion go on to pass the demanding qualifying examinations for jobs at the European Union institutions that make law and policy for the entire 25-nation bloc. These ambitious young men and women work hard for most of the week. But when they play, they do so in a spectacular fashion.

In their lavishness, often subsidized by corporations in the students' home countries, those festivities hint at the privileges that graduates of this private institution will enjoy as part of the EU's managerial elite. At the same time, the parties' emphasis on cultural stereotypes (mostly ironic) suggests the surprisingly important role of national identity at this multinational institution, which must respond to the nation's growing diversity even as it teaches the practice of European integration.

"The social experience of living together and of working together—is this really a great benefit," says Jenny Belendi, a German who studied economics and law at Bruges last year and is now running a:doctorate in marketing at the Free University of Berlin. "Just understanding the other nationalities, the other ways of thinking."

A MEDIEVAL MUSEUM.

The college was founded in 1949 by Salvador de Madariaga, a Spanish writer and diplomat, who envisioned a cosmopolitan institution that would help forge a European identity.

Although students and faculty members at the College of Europe generally favor European unity, says Paul Darmet, the college's rector, the level of integration is a subject of constant debate.

Jacques Pellmona, chairman of the economics department at the College of Europe, says the college emphasizes practice because theory is not important at the European Union's headquarters in Brussels.

Although students and faculty members at the College of Europe generally favor European unity, many of the college's students and faculty members at the College of Europe generally favor European unity.

Students at Bruges, who normally pay one third of the $19,000 it costs to attend (with most national governments giving scholarships to cover this cost), enroll in one of three departments: economics, law, or political science.

The presence of former European Union officials on the faculty, and the proximity of current decision makers in Brussels, help keep them grounded in experience. Politics students take part every year in an elaborate "simulation game," in which they play the roles of member-state delegations in the
INTERNATIONAL

Continued From Preceding Page

Council of Ministers, the union’s highest governing body. As they prepare, they often interview the actual diplomats they will later negotiate with to learn their govern-
ments’ positions.

Because of this real-world focus, the curriculum changes continually to reflect policy developments. The interdisciplinary program in law and economics, begun in 2004, Mr. Felix-
mann explains, is a response to the increasingly "geo-market, pro-com-
petition approach" of regulators in Brussels and across Europe. Next academic year, the college will inaugu-
rate another interdisciplinary pro-
gram on the EU’s international rela-
tions, a topic made relevant by the
development of a common European foreign policy.

Such flexibility is possible, says the rector, Paul Demaret, a Belgian legal scholar, because of the col-
lege’s initiative-taking policy: All professors are visitors, under con-
tracts granted for one year at a time, and they can easily travel across the Continent to lead four-
hour seminars each week. (Teaching assistants, who handle administrat-
tive as well as academic tasks for the professors, are hired on a four-year basis and live near campus.)

EVERYBODY’S A MINORITY

The topics in the curriculum have naturally shifted as the European Union has grown from a founding group of six in 1951 to 25
today. The college opened a Polish campus in 1992 in anticipation of the union’s eastern expansion, which finally occurred with the admission of 10 newly former Communist countries last year.

The Natolin campus, located in a suburb of Warsaw, features a number of facilities in Poland’s neighbor Belarus, the last full-fledged dictatorship in Eastern Europe. The EU’s growth has inevitably diversified the college’s student body, which now includes 47 nations, but is mostly composed of citi-
zens of member states. Students and staff alike acknowledge that this diversity is the institution’s most distinctive trait. "Normally if students go to study abroad, they are a minority at a national university," notes Robert Peat, a German soci-
ologist and a college vice rector in charge of the Natolin campus.

"Not at the College of Europe. Everybody’s a minority."

Students, who typically serve with previous experience of study abroad, often through the union’s Erasmus exchange program, had themselves

"already lived abroad." "Listening to a French professor explain the reasons for the European Union is different from the late French president’s opposition to British membership in the EU to the Irish public’s other than ‘anti-Anglo-Saxon feelings.’

Teaching styles, too, can vary with national origin. "Some faculty use the Anglo-Saxon system, which is a much more interactive teaching style. Others come from the French system, which is more a lecture-based sys-
tem with less discussion," says Mikołaj Kołodziejski, a German citi-
zen who recently earned a politics degree at Bruges and now works as an assistant to the rector here.

Students advertise their national cultures to each other in organized events, of which parties are only the most entertaining. The week pre-
ceding each "national" event typi-
cally features films and lectures sponsored by students from the nation’s national group. Current events also provide occasions for such presentations, as when Pol-
ish students recently displayed on the life of John Paul II following the Pope’s death last April.

Unlike several years ago, the pre-
vailing cultural ideal both at the col-
lege and in Brussels was that of the "eclectic cosmopolitan," as Mr. Risticek, an Italian who has taught law at Bruges since 1980, says. "Today people feel that what we want is for each state to conserve its identity, which is to our richness."

One ironic effect of the EU’s growth, on both the college and its students, has been to con-
firm the dominance of a single lan-
guage, English. Though the college still requires French for admission, and all departments make students take a certain number of courses in the language, students report that English is now the undisputed lin-
guo franca of social life.

The students also immense expo-
sure to other cultures naturally hap-
pen in their everyday contact with faculty and visitors from 27 (in Bruges and 10 in Na-
tolin) countries, who spend the entire academic term in college-owned buildings and even live together in college dormitory arrangements. This promotes intimacy, as does the rela-
tion lack of distractions, languages, and an exquisitely preserved jewel of Flem-
ish architecture, picturesquely enough, to the somewhat sophisticated life. The Natolin campus forms part of a 300-acre nature re-
serve, 45 minutes from downtown Warsaw.

Mr. Wielchowski, the rector’s assist-
ant, who lived in the United States between the ages of 9 and 25, came to appreciate the varieties of Euro-
pean national character while help-
ing to run the student bar with oth-
er students who came from 10 dif-
ferent countries. "You find all kinds of different cultural perspectives and even different ways to run a meeting, and I learned a lot much from that," he says, noting that the school’s students were far less formal than the northern Europeans in the way they ap-
proach school-based matters.

For Kristin Meczkowski, a Norwe-
gian who studied politics in Bruges and the current director of the Natoli-

The yearlong inquiry that led to the report was conducted by Australia’s constitutional govern-
cement amid reports that as many as 30 percent of high-school gradu-
ates could be functionally illiter-
ate.

"The quality of higher education is dropping, not least in respect of

A COMMITTEE of prominent Aus-
tralian educators has sharply criticized how the country’s higher-education system trains

Students are advised of the national cultures from various different cultures reveals the fundamental values that unite them: "When an Albanian and an Italian are together, or a Finn and a Greek, they become aware that we are all Europeans," by virtue of a shared belief in democracy, solidarity, and tolerance, among other principles, he says. "To be European means to be conscious of holding a set of common values."

Yet the commonality’s diversity extends to views on the nature and value of European integration itself. As one student of Turkish extraction put it, "we should all get together to talk about our policies and the EU’s social democracy. People here are already part of a very small group in their countries," she notes. "Most of them have been abroad for many years. It’s different to talk to a guy who works in a supermarket in War-
saw."

The idea that European elites are out of touch with their populations is not new. Many commentators have used to explain this year’s French and Dutch referenda, even votes against the proposed EU consti-
tution, a measure that opponents argued would have given more power to Brussels.

When asked about the voters, which represent a significant proportion of the constitution, faculty and students at the college tend to say that they represent a failure by the EU’s leaders to communicate the mean-
ning and benefits of integration to citizens at large. "People who have not had the chance to study it well have not perceived what Europe re-
ally is," says Carla Acquavella, an Ital-
ian studying law at Bruges. "The message that comes through is that more information is needed. It’s im-
portant to make people conscious."

Australians Educators Criticize Training of Teachers

Mr. Markussen, a citizen of a country that has until now chosen not to join the EU, and who says she is skeptical of many aspects of integration, acknowledges that Euro-skepticism is not taboo at the college, and that her views found a respectful though sometimes be-
neus hearer in and out of the classroom. But she detections a more subtle type of conformity, "Even if you don’t want to, you take on con-
cepts, you take on ways of thinking."

"No one’s confidence in the prospects of the overall EU proj-
ect—or of their own careers within it—seems to have been shaken by recent events. The consensus view is Rector Demaret’s, that "European integration stands to lose a few years," but that the process will con-
in. "Eighty percent of European interdependence reality," says Vice Rector Field. "You can’t go back."