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# Six Years as Administrateur

Pierre Corvol

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

Source: *La lettre*, no. 34, July 2012

You have been *Administrateur* of the Collège de France for six years: what aspect of your work is most meaningful to you?

The Collège de France has three missions: teaching, research and the dissemination of knowledge. I have focused primarily on developing the third aspect. When I arrived, the website already existed and shared important information about the life of the Collège as well as a number of recordings and documents available to Internet users. I felt that more needed to be done, so that all the work that goes into the preparation of the professors' lectures would not be the preserve of the happy few who are able to attend the classes given within the walls of the Collège. Current means of dissemination constitute a wonderful opportunity to accomplish this project. Our equipment was already of a very high standard, especially in terms of sound recording, and our staff highly qualified across the entire organisational and technical chain – which necessitated the switch to digital, in particular. We were therefore able to start making the lectures available to the public in 2006, in the then unfamiliar form of podcasts. The site rapidly gained momentum until it offered the bulk of the lectures by most professors, who were of course all free to choose what they wanted to broadcast. The system extended to the opening symposia and to important conferences or seminars.

Initially, few events were filmed. We have developed the supply of video documents considerably, thanks to the patrons' financial support, particularly that of the Bettencourt Schueller Foundation, which has allowed us to film and broadcast the professors' lectures and seminars and to translate most of the lectures into English voiceovers and, for some, into Portuguese, Spanish and even Chinese. This endeavour has paid off remarkably well: none of us could have imagined that we would be able

to multiply the Collège's audience a hundredfold. And the press has enthusiastically welcomed this development.

Who follows the Collège de France lectures?

In 2009 and 2010 we carried out surveys on the audiences in the auditoriums and the Internet users visiting the website<sup>1</sup>. When I saw the results I was surprised to note, for example, that more than half of the members of the audience present in person followed at least two series of lectures. In other words, the people who are sufficiently specialized to follow a course in one domain are also eager to learn about domains in which they are less specialized. The study of Internet users brought to light the existence of a young population interested in the Collège's courses. By making the characteristics of a very large, "immaterial" audience visible, it leads the professors to take a new dimension into account. This survey constitutes a reference which will allow us to analyse trends in later studies. The overrepresentation of Internet users from the Paris region, in particular, shows us that we can extend our audience further, to the rest of the country, and beyond. This action must be pursued tenaciously if we want to secure the Collège de France's role in the dissemination of knowledge over the long term.

Research continues to draw on written sources, which are increasingly digitized. What has the Collège de France done in this domain?

The accomplishments of the Collège de France in terms of electronic publishing should be emphasized. By publishing archive texts or unpublished books online<sup>2</sup>, we are laying the foundations of a digital corpus that is both useful for Internet users today and valuable for the future. The online collection of *Inaugural Lectures*, for instance, traces the evolution of the Chairs and Disciplines at the Collège de France. Since 2006, 46 Chairs have been created, including the Annual Chairs. Inaugural Lectures can now be consulted online, both in conventional disciplines and in the case of chairs oriented towards societal problems. Old Inaugural Lectures will also be digitized. These texts, along with the other digital collections of the Collège, are available in different formats from the website (see p. 107).

Where does the Collège de France stand in relation to the other online knowledge offers?

The leading US universities – Yale, MIT, Stanford, etc. – as well as European institutions have developed online broadcasting initiatives, sometimes on a large scale. While the Collège is well positioned in this competition, it has comparatively very limited means. Our success presents us with a new challenge if we are to maintain our global ranking. We will have to further develop these initiatives and particularly urge the public authorities to provide us with resolute support, so that we can widen the scope of our broadcasting to the public, both in France and abroad. To do so, a concerted and extensive effort is needed, shared by the universities, graduate schools, embassies and French institutes abroad.

Since the advent of the Internet, the dissemination of knowledge seems to have taken on greater proportions than before, when it was removed from education and research.

The Internet turned everything upside down in the space of a few years. Teaching at the Collège de France has always been open to all and free of charge, but in the 5<sup>th</sup> *arrondissement* of Paris. There was a unique place in this city, well situated in the Latin Quarter. There, amongst other colleges and neighbouring institutions, was the

Collège de France, where one could go to receive education that existed nowhere else. This situation had not fundamentally evolved. Today, everything has changed. The Collège de France is no longer just Parisian; it transcends all borders. It has become ubiquitous through the power of global networks, while remaining faithful to its spirit. The new broadcasting systems provided by the rapid evolution of the Internet have paved the way for practices that were not possible barely ten years ago. We are taking the evolution of practices into consideration and adapting our offer accordingly, in terms both of content and technical aspects: the next version of the site will therefore be adaptable to all mediums, particularly mobile devices. A smartphone application will soon be available. With regard to usage, I am delighted that a significant number of visitors report using documents viewed or downloaded for their own teaching or research. The Collège is therefore the starting point of a whole chain of knowledge dissemination: that is one of the objectives we wanted to reach. This success rewards the fact that the lectures of the Collège offer truly original content which is renewed annually and meets stringent requirements, while remaining accessible or at least being presented with a real concern for furthering education.

What ambition does the Collège de France have for the future? Where must it stand in the education and research landscape, both in France and abroad?

The Collège is a prestigious institution, recognized as such throughout the world. It has a particular aura in the humanities, a domain to which we pay a lot of attention. Its reputation in this domain is unquestionable, as evidenced by our colleagues abroad who consider the Collège as a flagship institution, the only one of its kind in the whole world. But we should also note that the “hard” sciences are currently the ones obtaining nine tenths of the research funding. Most of our laboratories have required extensive renovations due to the highly technical nature of the research. We are deploying considerable efforts, which are leading to a real revival of the laboratories of the Marcelin Berthelot site. Some have been created, others improved or reinforced. That is the case in biology, where 16 research teams have been brought together in a single unit, the Centre for Interdisciplinary Research in Biology (CIRB). This Centre provides technical and administrative support for the biologists, as well as a shared technical platform. A similar effort in terms of means, staff, premises and equipment is programmed for the development of research activities in physics and chemistry. The numbers speak for themselves: in 2006, the Collège counted approximately 150 researchers and technicians at the Marcelin Berthelot site; in 2013 there will be close to 450. The revival of experimental research laboratories has led to the fostering of closer ties and collaboration, especially with PSL (Paris Sciences et Lettres, Research University), and in particular to developing close ties with the École normale supérieure (ENS) as well as with the École supérieure de physique et de chimie industrielle (School of Physics and Industrial Chemistry), the École nationale supérieure de chimie de Paris (School of Chemistry) and the Institut Curie. We thus have or will have, in the near future, well articulated Centres of Excellence for the three major domains of biology, chemistry and physics.

This effort should contribute to the recognition of the research carried out within our walls. It will contribute to reviving the institution’s image by extending to a promising future the paths of a past punctuated with great figures of the scientific world whose names are engraved on our walls and in the history of science.

What is the role of a scientific institution like the Collège de France in society and in political life, in the broader sense, of a country?

This question appears throughout the history of the Collège de France. It is emblematic of the place made for knowledge in a society. The Collège must maintain an overarching position. One of its roles, in the domains of interest to the social and political life, is to supply analyses that are as objective as possible, performed by specialists whose scientific integrity is certified by peer recognition. On arrival at the Collège de France, professors are invested with a certain responsibility by society. The institutional recognition of their expertise imparts them with a particular authority: they are more than experts; they become references, in a sense, in their different disciplines. They also have a critical function, and become actors of political life in the broader sense of the term.

The Collège de France's strength lies in its capacity to choose the best professors and researchers in all disciplines, owing to its procedure for the selection of professors for perennial Chairs. When I took on my functions as *Administrateur*<sup>3</sup>, I emphasized the fact that while the Collège was certainly an assembly of great scholars, it was not an ivory tower. It is not insensitive to the questions and concerns of our society. It has built solid ties with the economic and social world, particularly with the intention of making the contributions of fundamental research available and of sharing them with its audiences. That is why we wanted the Collège de France to complete the education it offers with the creation of Annual Chairs on key issues in current affairs and on emerging scientific subjects with far-reaching social implications. Every year the Chairs created on subjects such as Technical Innovation, Sustainable Development, Knowledge against Poverty, Artistic Creation, and the Digital Sciences have allowed a renowned specialist in the field to deliver a lecture that has been broadcast on the website and translated into English, as with that of the perennial Chairs.

That is the spirit which has guided the creation of these Chairs. That is also why we have raised funding from patrons without departing from the missions that have been our own since the very beginning, and without encroaching in any way on the means that are allocated to us. The procedure for the nomination of the Annual Chairs follows the practices of the Collège: each one of them is the result of a concerted decision, after reflection by the Faculty, which mandates colleagues for preparatory work. The Annual Chairs represent an adjustable part of our activity, defined freely. Our Committee on Scientific and Strategic Orientation (COSS) has reinforced our strategy of creating Annual Chairs and seeking patrons.

We have thus benefited from the teaching of renowned researchers on current themes, and these regular spotlights have contributed to the visibility of the Collège de France on the research landscape and among the public at large. This sign of opening onto society has constituted an undeniable benefit for the institution.

The Annual Chairs can be seen as the Collège de France opening up to applied or oriented research aimed primarily at meeting the social demands that relate essentially to a political governance of science, while the Perennial Chairs are seen as representing "fundamental" science.

Is this impression justified?

The boundary between fundamental research – so called "pure" research – and applied research – innovation and its transfer, for example in industry – is porous. It

is actually a continuum. Of course, in the information sciences for example, one can do fundamental research essentially based on highly specialized mathematics, and one can also do applied research like in robotics where the focus is on developing a precise object, with numerous potential applications. In reality, the distinction is often not as straightforward and it is rare for the two aspects to be completely independent one from the other.

A certain number of Annual Chairs at the Collège, especially in the domain of technological innovation, are also entrepreneurs. I am glad that is the case, as it shows that the famous “transitional” research – often brought up in medicine, which seeks to ensure the transition from so-called fundamental research to application to patients –, can be carried out by real scientists who are also concerned with developing applications of their research, which can lead to the creation of a company. And this research has practical applications that are not just a source of profit for the company as they very often have wider benefits and allow for the improvement of many people’s living conditions. That is at least the perspective from which we chose the themes and the type of education provided by these Chairs and convinced patrons to support us.

How is patron's money used?

Companies’ patronage is often very oriented and requires more than returns in terms of image only: it implies that the activities of the beneficiary institutions correspond to the patron’s interests. The Collège de France has been fortunate to have truly generous and trusting donors, and their donations have also encouraged projects that are not linked to teaching alone. They have provided funding for real estate projects like the renovation of the biology, physics and chemistry buildings – close to 16,000 m<sup>2</sup> –, of the General Library, and of the Cardinal Lemoine site, and for the equipment of the new biology, physics and chemistry laboratories, etc. Patronage has also been used for the broadcasting projects on our “digital campus”. One of our patrons has also allowed for an ambitious information and library management system to be created.

This patronage will play a decisive role in the implementation of the archive reorganization and digitization project, which is closely intertwined with the history and identity of the Collège. We have given the Collège's renovated General Library an essentially heritage mission, as well as a mission to manage professors’ archives and the archives of the teaching offered at the Collège. These are long-term projects that require forward thinking: I would personally like professors to each be able to file a certain number of their archives at the Collège, and for the documents and correspondence relating to their time at the Collège to be transferred to the archives and digitized to be usable. Eventually, research concerning all of the activities of the Collège's Professors could be done onsite.

It is moreover the contribution of a new patron that is allowing us to digitize of Étienne-Jules Marey’s photographic plates, of photographs of the Chair of History of India and Greater India, of documents from the social anthropology laboratory, and of Claude Bernard’s notebooks.

The Collège de France Foundation, created in 2008, also provides support for research both in the humanities and social sciences, and in the fundamental sciences. These

funds represent a valuable supplement which contributes to the independence of the Collège and the freedom of its researchers.

These contributions are all the more useful since the current running budget of the Collège de France was fixed four years ago and has not evolved since, despite inflation and the charges generated by the new research spaces, which are still going to increase considerably with the completion of the physics and chemistry building's renovation and its return to operations.

The Collège de France has undergone another important change with the creation of the PRES Paris Sciences and Letters (PSL) and the allocation of the Idex. The Collège now belongs to a large collective. Does the future lie with collective work and the pooling of resources?

It is a future in the making. Creating PSL was an important and complex decision, and I recently reviewed the challenges involved<sup>4</sup>. It is one more opportunity to give our institution the means for consolidating its position as a leader in French research. By taking part in this project from its inception, I sought to transform the still limited cooperation attempts with the ENS into a powerful centre of research and higher education. Concerned with preserving each partner's identity in this joint undertaking, I strove for each of us to keep control over our projects and budgets. For the next five-year contract covering the 2014-2018 period, the Collège de France, just like each of the other PSL participants, will have a separate contract. This clearly means that our policy, as well as those of the ENS and the other Idex PSL partners, are preserved and individualized in our respective contracts. There will be an *additional* PSL contract, which represents supplementary funding for the Collège as well as its partner. Let me add that PSL and the Campus plan have also provided us with the opportunity to benefit from funds allocated to real estate, with which the Cardinal Lemoine site and its libraries will be modernized and restructured.

In reality, the Collège could not envisage remaining static and wallowing in splendid isolation when major reorganizations of university education and research are being implemented. This trend is not just affecting France: it is also present in Germany and in other European countries. It is necessary to bring together high-level research from the different disciplines into Centres of Excellence that are better able to gather the considerable means needed for their activities in order to be more competitive, to stay at the forefront of research.

What does the cooperation with the graduate schools involve?

The purpose of the Collège de France is to teach freely about research underway and discoveries in progress. It is not responsible for students' training. That said, the Collège cannot ignore that it is part of a higher education system to which it must also contribute. The audiences that follow the lectures and seminars of the Collège de France have always included students, as the knowledge thus imparted is different and complementary to the education received at university. For instance, the lectures of a scientist who is also the head of a biotechnology start-up provide information that would be hard to find elsewhere, and from which students can benefit. But it quickly became clear that the type of education provided at the Collège de France, as much in the humanities and social sciences as with the Annual Chairs or in the fundamental sciences, correspond to a real demand from PhD students.

With the agreement of the graduate schools, PhD students following the Collège de France courses can validate these as part of the education they are required to receive within their PhD curriculum. In this way, we are both respecting the universities' training mission and the mission of the Collège de France. In 2012, this system applies to all chairs: all lectures, seminars, symposia, and lecture series by visiting professors are offered for validation by the graduate schools with which we have conventions. Over 200 PhD students are presently following a professor's lectures. They come from 29 different graduate schools, in both the humanities and social sciences, and the hard sciences. This is a way of attracting to the Collège young audiences that benefit fully from this highly specialized education. We can surely do even better to attract PhD students if we further enhance our promotion efforts. The success of these initiatives in a competitive environment requires constant monitoring and great perseverance.

Is it easy to shift from the job of a researcher to that of the *Administrateur* of an institution such as the Collège de France?

It constitutes a very significant change which leads to new responsibilities that are different from those one is used to in a hospital ward or a university department. The objectives I had set myself with my colleagues from the Collège office required a steadfast commitment and a profound administrative reorganisation for the Collège to be able to continue fulfilling its missions. I have had to implement:

- the shift to the Law on the Responsibilities and Freedom of Universities (LRU) on an administrative level: the Collège is now autonomous and can for example choose to handle recruitments itself and manage the positions it has;
- the creation of *ad hoc* committees that were needed for the move to broader competences and that allowed for improved social dialogue within the institution;
- the creation of the aforementioned research and higher education centre (*Pôle de recherche et d'enseignement supérieur* - PRES) of the PSL (whose legal structure is a scientific cooperation foundation);
- the project of the Institute of Civilizations: apart from its scientific value, this project should allow the Collège to benefit from 45 million Euros in public-private partnership under the Campus plan;
- the participation of the Collège in the PSL Idex project: it marks the integration of the Collège into academic and scientific collaboration with the institutions that are part of PSL, and secures the funding for major scientific projects.

Reorganizing the administrative services has required considerable efforts and an extensive mobilization of staff. These changes have allowed us to prepare for the future through the necessary modernization of the Collège.

Furthermore, I was eager to develop a social policy for the staff. As a result, a series of measures have been developed, such as an increase in funding for training, an increase in bonuses thanks to the LRU, which affords staff an administrative and financial incentive for their activity, and the implementation of a social assessment, through which every individual can situate him or herself in the life of the Collège.

I have endeavoured to foster dialogue between the different members of staff working at the Collège and to improve their living and working conditions. I have worked towards that goal in various ways: by creating an intranet to improve information within the institution; by taking advantage of the reopening of the



renovated cafeteria to make it an interactive and friendly place; and by promoting the creation of the Chadocs society (young researchers and PhD students of the Collège) and supporting its activity. I have also sought to increase interaction between the professors by setting up two-day seminars for in-depth reflection on new possibilities concerning scientific life (new Chairs to create, etc.) and the major strategic options of the Collège (role of the Collège in the PSL, etc.). Finally, I have sought to enhance dialogue with the public, beyond the lectures, through events such as the Science Festival and the *Journées du patrimoine*.

You have also emphasized the international policy of the Collège de France. What does it consist of?

Our international activities are important and have warranted the creation of a dedicated unit (see “The Collège de France International Relations”, pp. 100-102). Between its faithfulness to a humanist tradition that it has never denied, and its opening to new ideas and practices, the Collège de France has successfully evolved and advanced towards the future. The idea of promoting free research and working towards making it accessible to all has more currency than ever.

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## NOTES

1. See Henri Leridon’s article in *La lettre*, no. 29, July 2010.
2. Five collections are available on the OpenEdition portal, accessible from the Collège de France website (publication tab): Inaugural lectures, Directory, *Collège de France Newsletter* (previously *The Letter of the Collège de France*), Conferences of the Collège de France, Philosophy of Knowledge.
3. See the editorial of *La lettre*, no. 18, December 2006. (4) Cf. Editorial of *La lettre*, no. 32, October 2011.

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## AUTHOR

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Experimental Medicine (1989-2012). *Administrateur* of the Collège de France from 2006 to 2012