Patrick Louchouarn, Vice-President of Academic Affairs at Texas A&M University at Galveston visited Marseille from July 1st to 9th in order to sign a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the University of Aix Marseille in France. This was the opportunity to meet the academic team and discuss potential partnerships in sea sciences and economics.

Initiated in January 2018 with a workshop in Galveston and more lately with the stay of an American trainee in AMU in November 2018, France’s cooperation with Texas A&M at Galveston mainly focuses on the recurrent phenomenon of massive stranding of sargassum – these highly invasive algae – all along the Atlantic coast. Not only environment and biodiversity, but also local economy and tourism are impacted by the aftermath of these algae landings – especially for such countries as France in the Caribbean islands and United States in the Gulf of Mexico. The Galveston Campus of Texas A&M University has long developed an expertise in sargassum monitoring, and since 2013 has been managing the SEAS – Sargassum Early Advisory System – web platform supported by the NSF and NOAA to monitor the evolution and movement of these algae.

With its economic and maritime potential, the city of Marseille has long admitted to be keen to forge links with Texan institutions and to encourage the emergence of projects around the “Blue Economy”.

Hence, Dr. Louchouarn met the Vice President for Research of Aix Marseille University, Prof. Pierre Chiappetta, and the Director of the Mediterranean Institute of Oceanography, Richard Sempere, to sign the memorandum. Intended to increase transatlantic cooperation between the two universities, the MoU places academic mobility (both professorial staff and students) at the crossroad of this partnership, notably through the establishment of joint research programs with the involvement of Texas A&M at Galveston experts in applications for ANR project grants related to ocean sciences. In the future, this document shall lead to a memorandum of agreement, exploring in deeper details modalities of this cooperation.
The visit was carried on the following day with the Aix Marseille campus tour and a presentation of Texas A&M at Galveston's research activities to the French academic community – among whom Patrick Baraona, Director of Ollioule’s Mediterranean Sea Division, and Francois Maugin, Vice-President of Maritime Operations for Kietta.

The journey ended on a meeting with Anne Garoux and Bertrand Righo, both in charge of monitoring the maritime sector and higher education within the city of Marseille. The discussion focused on the city’s opportunities for collaboration and initiatives with Texas. A highlighted project was the "Brain Port Community", a think tank bringing together various academic and economic networks on environmental, economic and social issues, or the Smart Port conference organized on July, 4th with the support of the Aix Marseille University. On the American side, Dr. Louchouarn announced the upcoming creation of a technology transfer center dedicated to ocean technologies in Houston area.

Overview of this week in France : no doubt the interaction between the Phocaean city and Galveston has been fruitful : "The visit to Marseille […] was exceptional and the reception from all the French hosts was extraordinary", emphasized Dr. Louchouarn, before adding that he was "enthusiastic about the future relations with Aix-Marseille University".

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