



The First French-American Science Festival in Chicago

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Supported by the French Institute in its call for projects regarding the promotion of scientific and technical culture, the first Franco-American Science Festival was organized by the scientific department of the French Consulate in Chicago.

The event took place over the course of two days: with an animation of scientific activities at the “Alliance Francaise” of Milwaukee on October 13th, 2011, followed by an intense program in Chicago, on October 14th at the Feinberg School of Medicine at Northwestern University located in the heart of town.

The project was twofold:

- creating with the participation of partners in Chicago, an event in the spirit of the “**festival of science**” **accessible to all, with various formats and content;**

- and sparking an exchange of experiences and good practices in **scientific mediation** in order to establish a dialogue and develop a partnership framework for joint actions.



In practice, the event in Chicago was divided into two phases: the first phase was dedicated to the public and primarily to **schools, with workshops, manipulations and exhibits**, and the second phase was for those involved in scientific mediation (professionals, scientists and teachers) around a **plenary session followed by a panel discussion** to encourage dialogue.

Cross-fertilization

The experimental workshops proposed a dual approach: direct experiments and demonstrations from research laboratories and a more playful approach using everyday objects offered by the **association the “Petits Débrouillards”**, which were a big hit with the younger participants. The Cross fertilization for this first event was made possible during interactive features such as the organization of a duplex with a science village of Rennes for younger audiences and a live virtual tour from the control room of the **European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN)** for the older participants.

The diversity of partners involved on both sides of the Atlantic - Northwestern University / Ecole Normale Supérieure (ENS) Ulm, CEA / CERN and Fermilab, the University of Chicago, the Field Museum and the University of Paris VI, Poitiers University / National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS) and the Illinois Institute of Technology was the key success of this event where several disciplines were represented: **chemistry applied to environmental energy and nanotechnology, biology and ecology, science of the universe and meteorites...**

Overall, no fewer than **two hundred fifty students** in American high schools and the French high school

came and visited throughout the long morning, to discover the activities offered by the forty animators, engineers, PhD students and researchers.

Fruitful meeting



Remarkably, the event took place in a highly convivial atmosphere: the students were able to handle, test, talk to young researchers, and take away ideas for experiments. The opinions collected - a questionnaire sent to teachers, students and facilitators is in the works - the exchange was very successful.

With regard to the discussion session between the scientific mediation professionals, the introductory lecture was given by Pierre Lena ([Academy of Sciences](#)), who after making a tribute to [Georges Charpak](#), developed the objectives and benefits of the [program "Get to Work"](#) a true reference in the field with fifteen years of existence.

The panel discussion, led by Dr. Gerald Niccolai (ENS Lyon / CNRS, ICAR Laboratory) introduced the debate with officials from several renowned institutions from Chicago - [Fermilab](#), [Argonne National Laboratory](#), [Northwestern University](#) - based on the experiments developed, and impact studies that were carried out. The participation of a representative of the [National Science Foundation](#) gave useful insights on mobilized funding for calls for "international" projects and selection criteria.

The conference brought together some sixty participants, mostly Heads of "science outreach" or "scientific dissemination" from university laboratories and research centers, and also departments of education, and young PhD students and postdocs interested in getting involved in such initiatives.

The appropriation of knowledge in question

If the presentations raised matters relating to the pedagogy of the diffusion of science, including the importance of questioning in scientific reasoning and experimental approach, "Science is made of questions, not answers" the exchanges during the discussion brought up questions relative to the appropriation of knowledge by citizens and specifically by the teachers;

knowing how to:

- provide tools to understand basic scientific phenomena and current issues of scientific research,
- facilitate partnerships with stakeholders in the scientific and technological community (laboratories, research organizations, businesses, museums, associations ...).

The assessment of a multitude of organized actions in Chicago, unfortunately too often dispersed, highlighted the consequences of a lack of control at a more centralized level. The parties that were present agreed on the importance of developing **joint and cross-disciplinary projects**. It is at this level that a **bilateral dynamic** could become a vehicle for new coherence and visibility.

One of the challenges is to make the "scientific culture" more accessible in order to enhance equal opportunities. Indeed, a number of factors hinder research and development (R & D) in the United States, including the weak academic and theoretical educational training of students in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM education) and the disaffection, as it is happening in France, of young people and especially those of minorities in scientific careers. The national and international surveys show a significant decline in the skills of young Americans. This is the reason for the **strong interest of our American partners seeking durable and quality programs developed in France**.

See also the [announcement and program of the French American Science Festival in Chicago](#).

Translated from [LatitudeFrance.org](#).

About the promotion of scientific and technical culture: *The French Institute* supports the development of exhibits in various formats for the support of operations performed by the French cultural network and French cooperation abroad, as part of the themes with strong political and economic stakes.