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Illinois Wesleyan Instructor Takes Students to France via Internet

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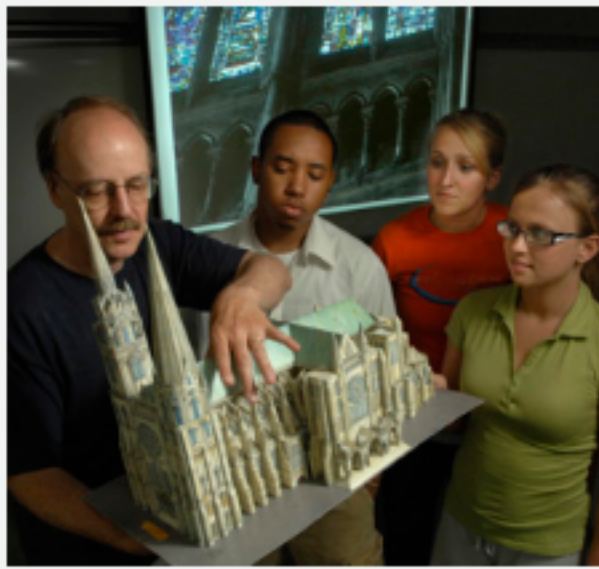
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May 21, 2007

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. –
Right now, Illinois
Wesleyan University
Associate Professor of
French Christopher
Callahan should be
walking up the steps to
the Solesmes Abbey
with the chants of the



Professor Callahan shows students a model of Chartes Cathedral. A virtual tour is in the background.

Benedictine monks echoing all around. Callahan planned to bring students to France and England to explore Gothic and Romanesque cultures, but he was halted in his plans by the high cost of travel.

"We could not make the trip financially feasible. The dollar is not doing well against the cost of the euros and pounds," said Callahan from his office overlooking IWU's Eckley Quadrangle in Bloomington, Ill., which is a long way from the castles and abbeys where he hoped to travel with students this spring during the University's May Term. "It's difficult for Americans to get abroad right now."

Callahan estimated it would take 24 students to make the trip affordable, but fell short of that. Instead of canceling the class, he decided on another option. While researching material for his class, *The Plantagenet World: France and England 1100-1400*, Callahan discovered Web sites that included virtual tours.

Now sitting at his computer, he uses the mouse to pan 360 degrees to tour through the breathtaking Conques Abbey in southwestern France. The image on the screen angles up to the impossibly high ceilings and Romanesque arches. "With the help of the Internet, we can even go where tourists usually don't," said Callahan, maneuvering the image to peer down from a balcony onto the altar below.

Callahan plans to take his class on several virtual tours, including sites in Paris, London and the Loire Valley of France. "This is something that was not conceivable even two years ago," said Callahan.

It will not be the same as being there, Callahan knows. "This will give students a fairly good sense of the architecture and accomplishments, but they can't possibly get a sense of the sounds and smells that make it all real," he said. Still, Callahan said there are benefits. "When you are on the road, it's difficult to find classroom space for 25 or 30 students. If there is an important point I need to tell them, I don't have their undivided attention while they are walking in a grand cathedral," he said. "In terms of actual physical experience, they will have to imagine a lot, but for intellectual foundations, we'll be better able to appreciate the visual and auditory components."

Students may not be able to stand in the nave of Gothic and Romanesque abbeys or walk down the streets of Paris, but Callahan hopes they will still come away with a better understanding of life in that time. His course includes teaching such things as various forms of music, architecture and even social expectations for sons and daughters during the time of the Plantagenet rule. "When we think of the Middle Ages, we think of this gloomy time where life was too regimented. We're cut off from how playful people could be."

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