Message from the Director

Dr. John A. Scherpereel

"One thing I really like about Florence is that there are so many female taxicab drivers. I know the numbers: Italy lags behind European peers when it comes to gender equality indicators. But the fact that there are so many women cabbies in this city must reveal something important about Florence's safety, its forward momentum, its underlying egalitarian ethos.

Sure, Italy has a ways to go when it comes to gender equality, but these women cabbies are important. They mean that things here are changing . . ."

This is what I was thinking, one jetlagged early afternoon in January, as a female cabbie drove me from Peretola to Palazzo Capponi. As I mentally grappled with the cabbie phenomenon, I noticed, out the window of the taxi, that other things were changing, too. Bridges previously covered in graffiti had been washed clean. The median strip in the un-lovely Piazza Stazione had been removed and replaced with a row of trees and park benches. The path that the taxi took to the palazzo had changed following the recent pedestrianization (and concomitant "one-way-ization") of various streets and piazzas. Yes, it was crystal clear: whether it was gender norms or urban geography, things in Florence were really changing...

After arriving and scaling the stairs at the palazzo, I ran into Dr. Mark Facknitz, this semester's Faculty Member in Residence (FMIR) for JMU's Semester in Florence program. "How are things going?" I asked, "How are you settling in?" "Things are great," Mark said. "This city is amazing. The last time I was here was in 1972. And you know what? Things haven't changed a bit!"

So, which one is it? Is Florence changing, or is it remaining the same?

I ask the question in this context because the EUPS program is approaching an important milestone--its fifth annual graduation ceremony. This year's graduation ceremony, which will take place at 10:00 AM on Friday, June 22 in Palazzo Vecchio's grand Salone dei Cinquecento, will be a lovely celebration, and I'd like to invite all program alumni to come to Florence to celebrate the class of 2012 and the program more broadly. JMU's outgoing president, Dr. Linwood Rose, plans to be in Florence to celebrate our graduates' progress. So do founding director Dr. Jessica Adolino and all of the program's on-site staff.

At the anniversary celebration, we will all reflect on the past and look toward the future. We will argue (civily!) about what has changed and what has stayed the same, and we'll help the class of 2012 make the leap into post-master's life. I know that it is neither cheap nor easy to make the trip to Florence. But I urge you: do give it a thought! The staff and university administrators know a lot about the program, but alums have "lived the program" and have been able to reflect, in a way that the others of us can't, on the program's contributions to their personal and professional trajectories. You have unique and valuable perspectives, and the rest of us--2012 graduates and families, program staff, President Rose, and others--would love to talk with you about finding jobs, finding a good pizza in the US, transitioning to the professional world, keeping up with your alma mater, etc.

We'll also be able to talk, of course, about Europe's (and Italy's) recent struggles and (possible) triumphs. Most of you completed your master's degree at a time of "existential questioning" in the EU and Berlusconian dramedy in Rome.

Fiorentino taxi in Piazza della Repubblica.
The existential questioning is still with us; in fact, it has picked up steam over the past two years. Greek, Portuguese, Irish, Spanish, and Italian fiscal nightmares have thrown the euro zone, and the EU more broadly, into new bouts of navel gazing and uncertainty. Twenty-five EU leaders (all but the Brits and the Czechs) recently signed a "Fiscal Compact" treaty in Brussels, which may (or may not) help to rein in national politicians on fiscal policy issues.

The age of Berlusconian dramedy seems, on the other hand, to have passed. We are witnessing a sort of mini-Renaissance of Italian euro-leadership. Prime Minister (and ex-European Commissioner) Mario Monti is playing Obama to Mr. Berlusconi’s George W. Bush. He’s winning plaudits, at least for the time being, with both Italian citizens and European leaders. The other "Super Mario," Mr. Draghi at the European Central Bank, has played a crucial role in conceptualizing and brokering the ECB’s contribution to the Greek bailout.

In addition to the points mentioned above, it would be a pleasure to talk through these big EU developments with you in Florence. And if such conversations are not incentive enough, consider just two other realities: (1) the dollar is doing pretty well against the euro, and (2) the graduation ceremony will take place right in the middle of the Euro 2012 men’s soccer tournament.

Regardless of whether you can make it to Florence, I’d ask you, as always, to keep the lines of communication open and to remember JMU. Feel free to drop me (and/or Caterina, Chiara, Alessandro, Laura, your former professors) a line. Share your recollections with us, and let us know what’s going on in your life. In the meantime, enjoy this issue of the alumni newsletter. Get a better sense of what’s going on in Florence. Find out what two alums—one in London, one in Brussels—are up to. Read about the issues that are keeping our current students up late studying. And reflect on what seems to be changing and what seems to be staying the same.

Forza JMU!

Dr. John A. Scherpereel
Program Director
This fall, EUPS students have been exposed to a wide array of new experiences. There is never a dull moment when living abroad and at times adjusting to life in a foreign land can be overwhelming. To make the transition smoother, we have been actively engaging with the culture around us—attending courses in Italian, language tandems, partite di calcio (soccer matches), volunteer events, and many other ways of interacting with Florentines and other international students. After our first month in Florence, though, there was still one aspect of Tuscan culture we had yet to fully explore----vino!

After a long week of classes and reading, there is nothing better than a daytrip to the Tuscan countryside to taste and learn about one of the region’s most renowned products. Our adventure took place in Panzano, a small town in the Chianti region halfway between Florence and Siena. Its rolling hills are lined with cypress trees and are rumored to be the background scenery of Leonardo Da Vinci’s Mona Lisa. Our tour guide, Stefano, briefed us on the history of Panzano and our itinerary for the day. “Siete tutti pronti a lavorare?” (“Are you ready to work?”), Stefano asked with a grin on his face. Eager to see the lush greenery and medieval remnants of Panzano, we began our hike to the vineyards. Unlike most of the visitors who flock the region, we were going straight to the source to learn hands-on about the first step in the wine making process---the picking of the perfect grapes.

Chianti’s most famous grapes, Sangiovese, are typically harvested in October. The vines are picked clean before the winter, and in the spring the process of grape growing begins again. While there isn’t much involved in taking the grapes off the vine except a pair of forbici (scissors), determining if the grapes are ready is crucial to the production of wine. Sangiovese grapes are characteristically very sweet, and their sugar content is carefully monitored. As we plucked the grapes that would soon become part of the 2011 vintage, we couldn’t help but sneak a few for ourselves. The grapes made for a delicious, sweet snack but left our hands purple and cosi appiccicoso (so sticky!).

The perfect reward for an hour of grape picking under the Tuscan sun is tasting the wine your grapes will one day become. Back in town, we were welcomed into the home of the vineyard’s owners, the Sassolini family, and enjoyed typical Tuscan specialties for lunch. We tasted four locally produced wines, olive oil, and digestive liqueurs. The Sassolini family villa was a like time capsule filled with medieval antiques and reminders of the family’s feud with the powerful Florentine Medici family. Our host explained the history of the property and then afforded us the opportunity to explore the grounds before returning home.

We all went back to Florence that evening full of good food and great wine. Everyone had a different part of the day that was their favorite, but we all got a taste of la dolce vita.
I am currently flying somewhere over the Atlantic - headed back to America for the first time in one year, almost exactly to the day. The last time I was home with my family, I had just completed my first semester of the EUPS program and could not wait to eat peanut butter, Mexican food, and Cheez-Its.

It is hard to believe that I graduated from the EUPS program six months ago. Time sure flies when you're living la dolce vita in Florence. I often feel homesick for Firenze, but I could not be happier living the dream in my favorite city of all – London!

Life after the program has been great. I graduated in June, went on holiday with my sister to Spain and then headed off for the British capital, with my suitcases full of Italian espresso and my Bialetti coffee pot, so that I would still feel the comforts of Firenze – the place where I spent 10 months of my life immersed in (what I consider) the heart of Europe, studying a very niche subject – something that most Americans (and even some Europeans) are clueless about.

To fully grasp the journey that I’ve made, it only makes sense to start at the beginning. While in Italy, I dreamt of moving to London (as my fellow classmates will attest) and working at a large public relations firm for European clients. Well, I’ve made it! I work at Ketchum Pleon, which is a large PR consultancy with offices in over 65 countries, as an Account Coordinator, which is an entry-level position. I work in the Corporate and Public Affairs practice for large multi-national companies, including IBM, FedEx, StubHub (which is expanding to the UK from the States) and Astellas Pharma Europe.

But, how did I get here? What’s my secret to finding a job?

First things first. As you all should know, if you are an EU citizen you are entitled to live, work and study, visa free, in any other EU Member State. I am lucky enough to be a Greek citizen (well, not so lucky, I guess given the current economic situation), so I am able to work in the UK. I discovered that Greek citizenship is granted by descent just a few months before starting the program, so I began the process and finally received citizenship in the spring. This is the only reason that Ketchum Pleon was able to interview me, as they do not grant visas for junior positions. So, all in all, having Greek citizenship has been vital for me. But what if you are not an EU citizen and are desperate to live abroad? Trust me - I understand what that feels like, but ever since I’ve moved to London, fulfilling a dream that I’ve had since my first visit across the pond when I was ten, I truly believe that, corny as it is, if you set your mind to something you can make it happen. Given the current economic climate, it is tough to find a job in any country, but Americans bring something very special to Europe, and I do not doubt that those of you who wish to pursue a career this side of the Atlantic will be able to accomplish it. In the words of Guns N Roses, all you need is just a little patience.

In my experience and the experiences of my American friends who work abroad, the best avenue to take is to find a job at a US-based multi-national, express your interest early that you’d be happy and keen to move abroad. You will have to put in a few years at the company and of course, timing and luck are also important, but you would be surprised at the number of people that this has worked for - some even in my office!

Now, I have not forgotten about those of you who want to stay in the US. After all, there are some great opportunities for Americans who have been educated in European affairs, especially those who have lived abroad. The key is to highlight these experiences and use this as your USP (unique selling point) in interviews. Again though, patience pays and you have to be willing to take a variety of routes to get to your desired destination, whether you want to be in Europe, the US or elsewhere.

Finding a job and career that makes you truly happy is the most important thing of all. The EUPS program was an absolute life-changer for me and I would not be where I am today in London without it.
People in the Palazzo

– Alessandro Gentili

Dr. Alessandro Gentili, has been a part of the Semester in Florence (SIF) program since day one and shares his experience in becoming part of the JMU family and the development of the EUPS program.

JS: What sparked the idea for a Master’s in European Union Policy Studies?
AG: In 2001, over coffee with Professor Giampiero Giacomello we decided that the undergraduate students studying the EU must go to Brussels. Giampiero had friends in Parliament that would help us arrange the trip. We went to a parliamentary plenary in fall 2002 and went back in spring 2003. Those two visits were so successful that we thought that a program in European Union studies would make sense. But the system is so complicated. In order to understand technicalities of treaties one needs a graduate program and more than a semester’s time.

JS: Why was Florence chosen over some other cities, such as Brussels and Strasbourg, where EU institutions reside?
AG: Florence has played a historic role in European integration. The Renaissance, birth of Humanist thinking, language and the trade that centered in Florence were forms of European integration that pre-date the European Union. Also, the close proximity to the European University Institute provides the academic and research support an EU policy program needs.

JS: You have been teaching a course on Dante’s Divine Comedy all these years. Why do you continue to teach Dante to students?
AG: For Florence, Dante is what Homer is to Greece and Virgil is to Rome. Dante is the poet of New Europe. The Divine Comedy was the first Christian epic. That language became the Italian Florentine vernacular and contributed to linguistic unification. Linguistic unification occurred before political unification in Italy. Dante is the beginning. Literature, philosophy, political science—it is an all engulfing piece of art. Students like that.

JS: Why was Palazzo Capponi chosen as the location for the program?
AG: We started in 2004 working on the program. Then we realized we needed new premises. Finding premises, accommodation and flats is a nightmare. Rents are very high. Early in 2005, we found Palazzo Capponi, which was an old charity building. It was in poor condition and needed renovation. I thought this place would suit the program. It had classrooms, space for students, and a mini flat for the resident manager and the FMIR. Colleagues came from JMU and agreed it was the right place.

JS: What was the biggest challenge you had to overcome when setting up the EUPS program?
AG: Getting this monster (Palazzo Capponi) ready and working functionally. The EUPS program was to start in fall of 2007. We worked tirelessly. It had been abandoned since the flood in the 1960s and we only had twelve months to restore it. There were many sleepless nights. Everyone thought we wouldn’t make it. But we made it!
UK and the Euro Crisis

In what was one of the most politically tumultuous years in EU history, some of the biggest surprises of 2011 came from the United Kingdom. Since joining the EU in 1973, the British government, and subsequently the British public, has been among the most vocal Eurosceptics in the Union. Historic cultural exceptionalism, coupled with the desire to protect economic sovereignty, have consistently driven the British to protect the intergovernmental approach in the EU. But as we observed in 2011, British policies towards the EU took several unpredictable turns.

During the height of the sovereign debt crisis in October, Prime Minister David Cameron announced to the world that the EU must work toward greater fiscal coordination in order to restore financial stability. Cameron's statements were not only contrary to decades of British views toward fiscal coordination, but they also came at a time when many Tory MP's were rallying for a vote on EU independence. Although the vote was a failure, clear divisions in the Conservative party emerged. In an effort to understand what seemed to be a major political shift, I met with British MEP James Elles of the European Conservatives and Reformist group. As a member of the Committee on Budgets in the European Parliament, I was especially interested in hearing his analysis of Cameron's comments. When I asked him if this was some sort of major shift in politics, his response was simple and straight-forward: "If nothing else, the Conservatives are pragmatic. David Cameron has seen how vulnerable the markets are, and he is clearly taking the pragmatic approach." While I was admittedly searching for some political revelation, Mr. Elles' response made perfect sense. British investment in the Eurozone needed to be protected. It was rational and completely understandable.

However, the biggest shock from Cameron came in the early hours after the Brussels Summit on 8 December 2011. Rather than following-up on his prior ideas of closer fiscal coordination, when faced with the possibility of tighter financial regulations in London, Cameron used his veto to effectively isolate Britain from the discussions. Although Cameron explained that his veto was used to protect the
financial sector of London, many in Brussels have argued that such isolation may pave the way for Europe-wide regulations; regulations that could affect London and would not have been voted-on by the British. While it may seem that Cameron was unyielding in his opinion, many of my British colleagues have suspicions that Mr. Cameron simply overplayed his hand in the negotiations.

For the first time in EU history, it seems that the old adage of the EU coming closer together in times of crisis might be challenged. Cameron's actions over the last several months have left Britain more marginalised than ever before. As a result, 2012 may prove to be the year when the UK further removes itself from the EU in order to preserve its influence. In many respects, this may not be a bad thing for the UK or for the EU. Such a removal could allow the British to participate in the free market (like Norway and Switzerland), while allowing the other EU members to deepen their supranational approach. However, as 2011 has proven, we may be in store for even greater political surprises in 2012. Only time will tell.