Loyola students embrace Vietnam
Study-abroad program is first of its kind in U.S.

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Forty years ago, Americans enrolled in college to avoid going to Vietnam.

Now, students at Loyola University Chicago are heading there to study abroad.
Loyola is the first U.S. university to receive a license for educational programs in Vietnam, the result of a dialogue with Vietnamese officials that began in 2007. Five Loyola undergrads went to Vietnam National University last semester through the newly created Loyola Vietnam Center, and 10 students are going in the fall.

Students said the experience is an opportunity to test their comfort zones.

“I have a deep fascination with Asia,” said Alice Leal, 20, who will spend next semester - the first semester of her senior year - in Vietnam. “I feel Vietnam is kind of left in the shadows. People never talk about Vietnam except in a way that some time has passed.”

Loyola officials said this was a chance to forge a positive relationship with a country with a large youth population and one of Asia’s fastest growing economies.

“Vietnam’s history with the United States is part of the reality,” said Patrick Boyle, Loyola’s associate provost of international initiatives. “To develop a positive relationship with the people in Vietnam is a good thing for us as a country and a university.”

Nearly 700 Americans studied in Vietnam last year through private study-abroad companies that match students with the country’s universities. Loyola hopes its Vietnam Center will one day evolve into similar, larger programs the school offers in Rome and Beijing.

While American undergraduates are studying there, Loyola plans to expand to offer classes like nurse education.

“Tens of thousands of American students have no idea of Vietnam’s culture,” said Leal. “It’s difficult to get to and not many students went there,” he said. “Now all that’s changed.”

China sends more students to study at U.S. universities and ranked fifth for countries receiving U.S. students. In 2008-2009, Vietnam is a top 10 exporter of students to the U.S., according to the institute.

“Education is not easy to export, especially when you want to do it American-style: lock, stock and barrel,” Goodman said. “Academic freedom, in general, is not easy to do this.”

Jimmy Siegel, 20, a junior from Cincinnati who studied in Vietnam last semester, said once he spotted a brochure for the new study-abroad program, he wanted to go.

“Vietnam was so different and out there,” Siegel said. “The adventure was what I expected. It was great.”

And affordable on a student budget, he said.

“The French microbrews — you get beer for 20 cents and it keeps coming,” he said.