

Project Name

Virtual Study Abroad: Student Engagement & International Interaction Using Meeting & Mobile Tools

Principal Investigator Lorette Pellettiere Calix

Campus Empire State College

Year of Project 2012

Tier Tier Two

Project Team

- Patrice Prusko Torcivia, Empire State College
- Oscar Leon, Panama

Overview Summary

A pilot project to provide the opportunity for all SUNY students to participate in a virtual term abroad. Researchers will analyze and try to resolve technical issues related to international collaboration and will compare a variety of tools for learner engagement and promoting cross cultural and/or international interaction.

Outcomes Summary

[Project outcomes](#) provide robust resources for the ROI of virtual study abroad, as well as feedback on technology requirements and support processes.

Project Abstract

The goal of this project is to enable all SUNY students to participate in a virtual term abroad. Empire State College (ESC) has a blended program in Panama, where the students meet face to face the first and last week of each term, and online in between. Students in other countries in the region enroll in our Panama courses and attend residencies virtually because they are unable to travel. We would like to extend this concept to SUNY students who can't travel due to financial or work constraints or a disability. Participation in a

virtual term abroad provides a cultural experience that develops critical skills students need to be globally competent and marketable in the work force.

Only a small percentage of students participate in study abroad programs and many groups are underrepresented. There is little diversity in race, gender and ethnicity nor access for non-traditional, lower socioeconomic groups, those with disabilities and first generation college students (Fischer, 2012). Improved technological tools will enable instructors to provide this opportunity for all students This corresponds to the SUNY goals of creating globally competent students, providing international exposure throughout all courses and degrees; and using social and emerging technologies to network students and faculty throughout the world (The Power of SUNY, SUNY and the World, 2009).

Implementation of a virtual study abroad that provides the best experience for students attending remotely requires testing a range of technological tools in international environments. Tools also need to be tested to determine which increase student engagement and intercultural interaction. Five Panama and five SUNY faculty members will collaborate in short term projects of 2-4 weeks that would not involve cross registering. These course collaborations will occur during Fall 2012 and Spring 2013. The next phase of this project would involve SUNY students cross registering in ESC International Program courses.

ESC's program in Panama is appropriate for this pilot project because the students move through the program as a cohort allowing us to evaluate difficulties and develop solutions over a 14 month period. Most students have high speed Internet connections in their homes and own smartphones and tablets with unlimited data plans. Prior to starting with the ESC program, none of the current students had experience studying online nor using virtual meeting tools (2011 Student Survey). During the grant period we will work with a cohort of students who have already experienced two terms of academic work without the improved tools, and will complete another three academic terms during the trial period. This allows them to give us valuable feedback on the changes.

Initial evaluation of tools such as Elluminate have shown promising results for increased learner engagement and interaction between countries. In a survey of Panama students (2011), almost 70% said that Elluminate sessions helped them stay more engaged and on schedule with their coursework, and over 50% said they felt courses with Elluminate sessions contributed more to their learning than courses without Elluminate. Despite these favorable results, the Elluminate sessions and other tools, have resulted in frustrations, generally related to technological limitations. These limitations were discussed with faculty, tech staff and vendors at several recent conferences; the proposed tools to be tested are a result of their recommendations.

With this grant we will:

- provide instructors with a wireless headset and microphone
- invest in microphones that capture the student voices in the room
- install echo cancelling tools and a large screen monitor
- connect a video camera on a tripod that can pan the room and/or focus on the instructor.
- hire a student paid by the hour to handle the video camera.
- invest in headsets for the students
- supply laptop computers, tablets and smartphones with all necessary tools installed for participating instructors as well as a dedicated laptop computer for the classroom.
- Test Blackboard Collaborate and MOVI (already provided by the college)
- Demo other virtual meeting tools using free trial options. This will keep costs down, making the project more easily replicable in other locations.
- Assess learner engagement and interaction on a range of instruments including smartphones and tablets.

Instructors with varying levels of comfort with technology have volunteered to test these tools and adapt their course materials accordingly. Patrice Prusko Torcivia will lead faculty training on the tools, suggesting appropriate uses and course design.

With this initial one-time investment, improved learning experiences for SUNY/ESC students attending virtual residencies in the Panama program will endure until equipment needs to be replaced. Since the project builds upon technology and equipment already existing at most SUNY campuses, there would be little further investment needed to replicate and expand this project. Other international locations could replicate the experience with a small investment, creating an attractive network for international interaction.

The goal of this phase is to resolve some of the technical issues in an international environment and analyze the success of the tools for promoting learner engagement and cross cultural and/or international interaction. Building upon the lessons learned, the second phase would involve replicating the project in other locations and addressing logistical and administrative aspects to cross register SUNY students in a virtual study abroad.

Reports and Resources

- [2013 Sloan Blended Conference Presentation](#)
- [This report discusses the technology used to support a virtual term abroad](#)
- [This is a bibliography of resources related to our topic](#)
- [Pre- and post- collaboration surveys for both students and participating faculty](#)
- [A form used to help analyze the blog discussions](#)
- [A form we used for virtual sessions to record technology used and related issues and resolutions](#)
- [This article discusses the value of a Virtual Term Abroad](#)

Instructional Design

- Online Education
- Student Learning Support

Instructional Technologies

- Mobile Learning