



It's a Small World After All for Community College Students

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Traveling abroad can be a life-changing experience for many students. The benefits include increasing cultural awareness, developing cross-cultural communication skills, and increasing self-confidence. Study abroad programs have the potential to transform not just students' academic lives, but their lives beyond the classroom. However, most community college students never study abroad or have the opportunity to visit a foreign country. Many are balancing family life with work responsibilities and can only dream of international travel.

Arkansas State University-Beebe has a long-standing commitment to globalizing our curriculum. We have been participating in a faculty exchange program with the Catholic University in El Salvador (UNICAES) since 2014 and have led international student field trips since 2017. Now, we are finding new, innovative ways to provide opportunities for international experiences for our students at home by capitalizing on virtual exchange initiatives. These initiatives allow our students to get involved in "more than the classroom" experiences.

Zoom Global Conferences

Zoom—communications software that combines video conferencing, online meetings, chat, and mobile collaboration—brings the global experience into the classroom for students who are not able to go abroad. We have led Zoom conferences with UNICAES in El Salvador, the indigenous people of Nawat Village, as well as individuals from India, Venezuela, and Taiwan. A successful Zoom Global Conference requires a carefully selected guest speaker, clear meeting objectives, and a prepared moderator.

Finding a Speaker

When searching for a guest speaker, take advantage of the connections that your students and colleagues have. One of our speakers was a retired statesman in Punjab, India. He was also the father of a student in my class. Prior to our meeting, I covered nationalism and political identities in India in class. My students came up with a list of questions ranging from religion, history, politics, and economics to discuss with our speaker.

Another speaker was a medical doctor who lived in Venezuela. I was put in contact with him by a friend. For this Zoom meeting, I invited macroeconomics students to participate with my class. Students asked questions pertaining to the political and economic crisis in Venezuela.

Sometimes, we need to take a chance and invite a guest speaker by email or phone. When browsing

through Facebook last month, I stumbled upon a video of the Australia's Got Talent audition with Golden Buzzer winner Mitch Tambo. Mitch is an Australian indigenous artist who performs and sings in the Gamilaraay language. I emailed Mitch Tambo and asked if he would be willing to participate in a Zoom meeting or record a video message for my students about his Aboriginal background and his effort to keep the culture alive. Mitch graciously agreed and we are looking forward to speaking with him soon!

Setting Up a Conference

I have had to move the venue for some of my Zoom Global Conferences from the regular classroom to an auditorium to accommodate more students, as well as our faculty, staff, and community members. In addition to my World History students, I have collaborated with three other faculty members from various disciplines including education, business, and law. Recently, we held a conference with the US Embassy in El Salvador that was entirely student-led. One selected student acted as the moderator, introducing the speakers and monitoring the meeting progress. Each faculty member brainstormed several questions with their students, and a list of questions was submitted to the Embassy a week prior to our Zoom meeting. Questions included:

- "What are the main educational challenges currently facing Central American countries, especially in El Salvador, in light of the mass exodus of children from Central America?"
- "What are the best practices of the host nation government in combating drug trade and gang violence?"
- "Where have US efforts been the most effective in assisting El Salvador?"

Conclusion

I believe there are innovative ways for community colleges to create global experiences for students. If you have a dream similar to mine, share that vision with your colleagues and mentor them to lead faculty-led field trips or to globalize their curriculum via Zoom technology. It is imperative that we think outside the box and find ways to connect our students to the rest of the world as they strive to be better citizens for a better future.

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