

East Carolina University, Greenville, North Carolina

Jami Leibowitz, Director of Global Academic Initiatives /Associate Director of Global Affairs

East Carolina University serves rural eastern North Carolina. A substantial proportion of our students are first generation college students of lower economic status who have never travelled beyond the state, much less outside of the country. Historically, few students took advantage of study abroad and even fewer international students came to ECU for study.

Project Begins 2003

In 2003, Drs. Rosina Chia and Elmer Poe piloted the Global Understanding (GU) course, combining ECU's existing strength in distance education with our need to prepare our students for a global knowledge economy. The Global Understanding course (<http://www.ecu.edu/cs-acad/intlaffairs/Global-Understanding.cfm>) is ECU's oldest and largest virtual exchange activity. GU is a full semester course in which students work synchronously with 3 partner institutions from various countries consecutively for approximately 4-5 weeks each. During these connections students discuss topics such as college life, family and cultural traditions, meaning of life and religion, and stereotypes and prejudices and work together on collaborative projects. Unlike most COIL practices, GU is a distinct course format taught through a variety of departments. It is not built upon pre-existing courses.

Developing Faculty Support

While Drs. Chia and Poe did not have any institutional support for the pilot, once the idea proved successful, senior leadership recognized the value of this approach and were supportive. The same cannot be said for faculty and department chairs. They were reluctant to get involved in what they saw as an untested approach that had no place in their rigorous curriculum. Most dismissed the program as having no academic merit. After years of proven results and managing the conversation, we eventually overcame that initial perception. Currently we have greater demand for what we broadly refer to as Global Academic Initiatives (GAI) (<http://www.ecu.edu/cs-acad/intlaffairs/Global-Academic-Initiatives.cfm>) than we can accommodate.

Scope of Global Offerings

Each semester, GAI works across campus to offer 15-20 Global Understanding courses and several other curricular and co-curricular virtual exchange activities. For example, in Fall 2017 we offered: 15 Global Understanding courses; had significant course collaborations in 4 discipline specific courses; worked with 22 of our first-year seminar courses to provide links; organized language exchanges for Spanish, Japanese, and Russian; facilitated multiple connections for our WorldWise student organization; and offered an academic seminar series. Each spring we also offer 2-3 full semester discipline specific courses and have a virtual student research conference where students present and discuss their original research with peers and faculty from our international partner institutions.

Staffing and Support

Other than paying faculty salary to teach the GU course and other semester long courses, we do not provide additional financial incentive for instructors to participate in GAI activities. Rather we provide significant technical and administrative support to ease the burden on faculty. GAI has 4 staff members and is advocating for a fifth to help provide this support and further develop virtual exchange activities on campus in ways that complement our campus-wide comprehensive internationalization goals. Those positions include:

- Director of GAI/Associate Director of Global Affairs: Responsible for partnership maintenance and strategic leadership and growth of virtual exchange.
- Coordinator of Global Understanding: Manages the day to day functioning of the Global Understanding classes.
- Coordinator of Global Technologies: Provides technical support and training.
- Administrative Support Associate.
- Coordinator of Global Activities (proposed): Coordinate links not associated with full semester virtual exchange courses.

International Partner Network, Recruitment and Support

Global Partners in Education (GPE) is our primary partnership network. (<http://www.ecu.edu/cs-acad/intlaffairs/gpe.cfm>) As of Fall 2017, GPE consists of 46 partner institutions in 25 countries and growing. Currently, ECU is the only US institution in the partnership. We also have a secondary network of approximately 25 – 30 EducationUSA, bi-national, and language centers that we regularly work with.

Over the years we have used various strategies to recruit partners, including working through personal/professional networks, the State Department and EducationUSA, and referrals from existing partners. To maintain partnerships, we use two strategies: 1) we have a centralized office (GAI) that maintains contact, provides support, and ensures regular participation by all partners; 2) we have developed the aforementioned (GPE) structure. Through GPE, we offer additional activities including an annual conference,. At the conference, partners self-pay to come together to discuss ways to improve existing programming, develop new programming, and network amongst themselves to strengthen those partner-to-partner relationships. While partners are not required to participate in the conference, representatives from approximately 20 of our international partner institutions attend the conference each year.

Outcomes

ECU has had many positive outcomes resulting from GAI programming. Assessment shows that students who participate in our programming increase intercultural communication and collaboration skills. Also, through receiving several awards including the 2016 NAFSA Senator Paul Simon Spotlight Award for Comprehensive Internationalization, GAI programming has shed a positive national and international light on our institution. While we may have more support and staff than most institutions recently incorporating virtual exchange, our biggest challenge remains securing the necessary resources to maintain excellence as we grow our activities.