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Alanah Joy Davis Mitchell

*Appalachian State University*, [alanah.mitchell@drake.edu](mailto:alanah.mitchell@drake.edu)

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# Communications of the Association for Information Systems

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## An Academic Exchange Experience: Lessons Learned for Study Abroad Collaborations

Alanah Mitchell

*Computer Information Systems, Appalachian State University*

*mitchellaj@appstate.edu*

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### Abstract:

Study abroad courses are becoming an important part of an information systems and technology education. These types of courses provide students with rich educational experiences, introducing them to different cultures, languages, and work practices that prepare them to work in the global market, as well as providing them the opportunity to use collaborative team skills. While the research suggests that these study abroad experiences are necessary and valuable, coordinating these types of study abroad experiences from the faculty perspective can be a difficult task. This research presents an example case of one such study abroad experience in the form of an academic exchange; it also highlights the findings and lessons learned. The findings in this instance may be generalizable to other academic exchange and study abroad experiences.

**Keywords:** academic exchange; study abroad; e-learning; globalization; IS&T education; IS&T curriculum

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Organizations need employees who can work in teams in order to be successful in today's competitive global market [Bullen, Abraham, Gallagher, Simon and Zwiag, 2009]. Information Systems and Technology (IS&T) students need to be prepared to lead cross-functional global teams, manage globally distributed projects, and work effectively in diverse teams [Topi et al., 2010]. Study abroad courses are becoming an important part of an IS&T education as they provide students with a rich educational experience while introducing them to different cultures, languages, and work practices that prepare them to work in the global market, as well as providing them the opportunity to use collaborative team skills [Harris, Belanger, Loch, Murray and Urbaczewski, 2011].

While the research suggests that these study abroad experiences are necessary and valuable, coordinating these types of study abroad experiences from the faculty perspective can be a difficult task [Harris et al., 2011]. A number of study abroad research articles focus on lessons learned [e.g., Harris et al., 2011; Kostovich and Bermele, 2011]. There are not, however, many research articles that address lessons learned from academic exchange experiences. Therefore, the goal of this article is to present a case study of one such study abroad experience in the form of an academic exchange. A secondary goal of this research is to provide guidance for future academic exchange and study abroad experiences with a focus on lessons learned. This reflection is intended to provide insight for those who will be leading these kinds of trips in the future.

The next section presents a background of study abroad and academic exchange experiences along with the pros and cons of the different types of international experiences based on previous research. The following section then describes the academic exchange case for this study. The subsequent section highlights the findings and lessons learned from this case. The article concludes with a discussion of implications for future academic exchange and study abroad experiences.

### II. INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE CURRICULUM

As previously mentioned, international experiences are becoming an important part of an IS&T education [Topi et al., 2010]. Previous research suggests that there are three ways to add an international experience to an IS&T education: (1) study abroad programs, (2) joint collaborative projects, and (3) student and faculty academic exchanges [Fuller, Amillo, Laxer, McCracken and Mertz, 2005]. All three of these options provide students with a rich educational experience, introducing them to different cultures, languages, and work practices.

The first way of introducing students to an international experience is the traditional study abroad approach. Typically, a study abroad trip involves taking students from their home university or country to visit a foreign university or country [Fuller et al., 2005]. These types of trips have been used in IS&T curriculum [Harris et al., 2011], as well as other areas of curriculum from computer science [e.g., Fuller et al., 2005] to nursing programs [e.g., Kostovich and Bermele, 2011]. Study abroad trips benefit students by providing them with an educational experience where they are able to experience the culture, language, and, many times, the work practices of the country visited. These types of experiences can range from short-term (i.e., a week or two) to medium-term (i.e., two weeks to a month) or even long-term study (i.e., a semester or year) [Harris et al., 2011]. There are a number of pros and cons for each of the different lengths of time [Harris et al., 2011]. For example, the benefits of a short-term study abroad experience are the lower cost and minimal school/work/family disruption. However, the downsides of a short-term visit are that projects need to be limited in scope due to time restraints, and students do not get much individual travel time. A medium-term study abroad trip addresses the downsides of the short-term trip by allowing for larger projects and individual exploration. However, a medium-term trip requires a large time commitment from faculty, and students may begin to miss home if they have not had an experience like this before. Finally, the long-term study abroad trips allow for a more full immersion and more detailed projects. However, with long-term trips it can be difficult to recruit students due to the cost and ultimate time commitment. It should also be noted that long-term study abroad trips are generally not coordinated by faculty but instead coordinated by the home university's international programs group or department.

The second alternative to provide students with an international experience is a joint collaborative project. Joint collaborative projects allow for students to interact with foreign students in order to work on projects that solve a particular problem [Fuller et al., 2005]. These types of projects provide students with collaboration skills and allow them to experience the educational processes and practices of foreign students. Joint collaborative projects have

been researched in a number of instances [e.g., Adya, Nath, Sridhar and Malik, 2008; Davis, Germonprez, Petter, Drum and Kolstad, 2009; Genuchten, Vogel, Rutkowski and Saunders, 2005]. From the student perspective, these types of experiences can be very valuable. In fact, previous work has shown that students find these types of projects valuable for learning the importance of effective communication as well as understanding the concepts of self-directed work, project ambiguity, and working in global, virtual teams [Davis et al., 2009]. Another benefit of joint collaborative projects is the minimal financial cost associated with these types of projects. However, the downsides of joint collaborative projects are the significant faculty effort required in order to coordinate such an experience as well as the effort to provide students with the realism and appropriate expectations for such an experience. Also, in most cases, the students do not have the opportunity to meet face-to-face with the foreign students and, therefore, have limited opportunity to confront language and cultural barriers [Fuller et al., 2005].

The final option for a student international experience, and the focus of this case, is a student and faculty academic exchange. With this type of experience, one faculty member has a relationship with another faculty member at another university (through a professional network or a university international program), and they agree to travel to visit one another with their students [Fuller et al., 2005]. This type of experience can combine the positive aspects of both a study abroad trip and a joint collaborative experience. For example, this type of two-way travel exchange, meaning that the students from the home country visit the foreign country and then the foreign country students plan a visit to the home country, allows for a joint collaboration project to be a major focus of the experience while still achieving the cultural immersion benefits of a study abroad trip.

With a two-way academic exchange, students have the opportunity to work together synchronously, face-to-face, when they are co-located, as well as work together asynchronously when they are not together (i.e., between trips). This rich educational experience takes advantage of the collaborative learning model. Collaborative learning is “a learning process that emphasizes group or cooperative efforts among faculty and students” [Hiltz, 1997]. This approach centers on team interaction and implies that students with different backgrounds and perspectives can learn through working together to solve problems or produce deliverables [Kirschner and Van Bruggen, 2004; Shen, Hiltz and Bieber, 2006]. The diverse backgrounds and perspectives of the student team members is a benefit of collaborative learning that allows for a richer problem analysis and solutions [Kirschner and Van Bruggen, 2004]. A challenge with collaborative learning can result from this diversity of team members. In fact, the diversity can put a burden on the process of problem solving in cases where there might be: (1) multiple compatible perspectives, (2) multiple conflicting perspectives, or (3) partially conflicting perspectives [Kirschner and Van Bruggen, 2004]. In order to be prepared for the challenges of collaborative learning and asynchronous teamwork, students should be taught how to work in this type of situation. Fortunately, the academic exchange model allows for instruction time to teach students how to work together asynchronously and also provides for situated learning, or learning while doing [Robey, Khoo and Powers, 2000], during the actual experience.

### III. ACADEMIC EXCHANGE CASE

#### Setting

In the academic exchange case featured in this article, students from an American university and a Belgian university were brought together to experience a two-way academic exchange in the Spring 2011 semester. The American students (referred to as the home university) were enrolled in an undergraduate IS course titled “Global Technology and Small Business Development,” while the Belgian students (the foreign students) were master level students enrolled in an entrepreneurship course. Altogether, there were 16 American students paired up with 17 Belgian students. This exact case is based on one academic exchange, but similar exchanges have taken place before and after this experience.

The American students traveled to Belgium for the first visit of the exchange during their spring break. One month later, the Belgian students visited the United States. During both visits, students attended regular class meetings and were given time to work on a group project. Students were also exposed to local cultural practices through social events and visits to local companies, landmarks, and sporting events. Table 1 shows the complete itinerary for both visits.

#### Task

The majority of the course grades for both university courses were based on a group business plan. Specifically, 60 percent of the total course grade for both university courses was based on the group business plan, with 30 percent based on a written deliverable and 30 percent based on a presentation. The remainder of the course grades were based on participation and individual journals. The business proposal was required to take advantage of team members’ knowledge of both the United States and Europe and have a global dimension (i.e., use resources, customers, and/or employees in at least the two countries). Students were encouraged to develop “born global”

**Table 1: Academic Exchange Itineraries**

Weekday	Agenda of activities for USA visit to BELGIUM	Agenda of activities for BELGIUM visit to USA
Saturday	American students arrive <i>Class field trip:</i> Sightseeing tour Dinner plans	Belgian students arrive Dinner plans
Sunday	Free day	Free day
Monday	<i>Class meeting:</i> Presentation on city history <i>Class meeting:</i> Lecture on “How to do a business plan”	<i>Class meeting:</i> Campus tour <i>Class field trip:</i> Landmark visit Dinner plans
Tuesday	<i>Class field trip:</i> Company visit Group work time Free night	<i>Class field trip:</i> Company visit Group work time <i>Class meeting:</i> Lecture on “How to do a business plan presentation” Dinner plans
Wednesday	Group work time <i>Class meeting:</i> Presentation on university history Group work time <i>Class meeting:</i> Student presentations on revised business plans <i>Class meeting:</i> Lecture on “Entrepreneurship”	<i>Class field trip:</i> Company visit <i>Class field trip:</i> Shopping <i>Class field trip:</i> NBA basketball game
Thursday	Group work time <i>Class field trip:</i> Landmark visit Dinner plans	<i>Class meeting:</i> Company visit Group work time
Friday	Group work time <i>Class meeting:</i> Lecture on “Virtual teamwork” <i>Class field trip:</i> Company visit Dinner plans	<i>Class meeting:</i> Final project deliverables due including student presentations Dinner plans
Saturday	<i>Class field trip:</i> Landmark visit	Free day
Sunday	American students depart	Belgian students depart

businesses (i.e., businesses that from the beginning are international in nature). Following the initial course meeting, the American students were put into groups of two and the Belgian students were put into groups of two (with one group of three). In these co-located groups, the students began brainstorming business ideas so that each group would have something to start with. One American pair was then partnered with one Belgian pair prior to the trip to form a total of eight groups. As Table 1 showed, the groups were given time to work on their projects during both the first trip and the second trip. Teams were also instructed on how to work together virtually between the two visits.

The group business plan included both a written deliverable and a verbal deliverable. The written deliverable was the business proposal, a forty- to fifty-page document that included an executive summary, company background, market research, marketing plan, operations plan, HR plan, risk analysis, financial plan, and various appendices. The verbal deliverable was the final group presentation, a fifteen-minute, professional presentation outlining the business proposal. Both deliverables were due in the final face-to-face class meeting.

**Data Collection**

Following the academic exchange experience, the American students were surveyed regarding their satisfaction with the course project. In order to evaluate the success of the exchange, both qualitative and quantitative data were collected. Qualitative comments were collected from a post-trip survey that asked students about the process of working virtually. Appendix A details these survey questions. Additionally, qualitative comments regarding the projects were extracted from individual student journals. Quantitative data was collected in relation to project satisfaction. Questions of both project outcome and process satisfaction came from previous research [Tarmizi et al., 2007]. Appendix B includes the specific questions. All of this collected data helped to inform the lessons learned that are presented in the following section, which should provide guidance for future academic exchange and study abroad experiences. It is a limitation of this case, however, that feedback and lessons learned only include the “home” university perspective. However, it could be the case that “flipping” the perspective would result in similar lessons learned. Future study abroad faculty should follow the advice of the lessons learned with their own culture/country/university as the “home” university.

## IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on this two-way academic exchange experience, much was learned about leading this type of course from the faculty leader's perspective. Table 2 summarizes the findings and lessons learned in this case, while the remainder of the article expands on each of these points.

**Table 2: Lessons Learned**

	Lessons learned
1	Choose a faculty collaborator who has a similar work and teaching style as you.
2	Require students to do work before they are enrolled into your course.
3	Let the students "host" one another.
4	Let the students be responsible for the agenda and activities.
5	Encourage social activities and bonding outside of class time.
6	Include face-to-face collaboration time in the agenda.
7	Provide instructions on how to work virtually.
8	Let the students choose the technologies they want to use to stay in touch and work on the project while apart.
9	Emphasize professional behavior and cultural understanding.
10	Bring gifts.

### Choose a Faculty Collaborator Who Has a Similar Work and Teaching Style as You

For this academic exchange, the faculty leaders from both universities were introduced through a college-level international program. Prior to the start of the course, faculty had to work closely together to determine the grading rubrics and grades for all of the students in the course. It was necessary that the group project was weighted the same for the students from both universities since the students were collaborating in groups. It would be difficult to give half of the group (i.e., the Americans) one grade and the other half (i.e., the Belgians) another grade when all of the students should have been contributing equally to the course project. Since the students were responsible for producing the final proposal and presentation as a group of American and Belgian students, the faculty had to agree on the grading of the proposal and presentation. After the students completed their presentations on the last day of course work, the faculty leaders sat together and discussed the presentation grading. While the verbal deliverables and the written deliverables were due at the same time, it took another week to review the written deliverables. This allowed time for the Belgians to return home and gave the faculty time to read through and comment on the written deliverables. After a week, the faculty discussed the written deliverable grades, as well as the final overall grades. The faculty members worked virtually (e.g., through email and Skype) to negotiate final grades for each group. The grade negotiation in this case was a little difficult due to the fact that the faculty leaders had different teaching and research interests (i.e., IS&T and entrepreneurship) and, therefore, valued some aspects of the student's deliverables differently. For example, one faculty viewed a team's idea as superior and wanted to assign a higher grade due to the idea, while another faculty wanted to give grades based on the deliverable content. Ultimately, grading consensus was reached.

One of the key lessons from this experience is the importance of choosing a coordinating faculty member who has a similar work and teaching style as you. This lesson is especially important if the exchanging faculty are going to be establishing course goals and grading scales together. When preparing for an academic exchange trip, faculty should coordinate grading weights (reviewing any institutional grading standards) and plan lecture topics ahead of time to avoid grading and teaching conflicts. However, if conflicts do emerge during the course of the academic exchange experience despite prior planning, faculty should do their best to work through the conflict and negotiate a solution that satisfies all parties. Challenges in grading, teaching, research, or even cultural differences can generally be overcome through some discussion and compromise. However, if this is not possible, faculty should do the best by their students and know that the experience will not last long.

A second reason that this lesson is important is that the faculty leaders will be spending a lot of time together over the course of the exchange. It makes the experience much more enjoyable if the faculty have a good relationship. In fact, the experience can be very beneficial if the faculty are able to use some of the time to do work together (e.g., working on research projects or preparing for classes). Future faculty leaders might consider using college-level international programs to identify potential collaborators (as in this case). However, if adopting a role in a previously established trip, look for signs that there may have been issues in prior years; for example, faculty who have previously worked on an exchange are "passing" at the opportunity the following year. If there are no existing programs in place, there are many other resources available to faculty interested in establishing academic exchange arrangements. Faculty can check with college-level or university-level international programs, ask department colleagues for connections, or even send requests to professional mailing lists. Once a contact is established,



faculty should consider working with potential collaborators on smaller projects (e.g., joint collaborative project in class or even research projects) before committing to a full experience in order to make sure that working together will go smoothly.

### Require Students to Do Work Before They Are Enrolled into Your Course

The potential American students were informed of the academic exchange course through a number of promotional outlets including emails, flyers, and three different international travel fairs. Prior to course enrollment, the students were required to submit a resume including their GPA, accomplishments, and service activities. If the students did not already have resumes prepared, then part of their pre-enrollment work was to prepare a resume. Additionally, students had to line up a letter of recommendation from a faculty member. This letter of recommendation had to speak to the student's behavior and work in class as well as expectations for behavior and work while traveling abroad (based on the faculty's in-class observations). Finally, the students had to produce a one-page cover letter detailing why they were interested in the course and the international experience as a whole. The three pre-enrollment assignments (resume, reference, and cover letter) were reviewed by the faculty leaders for evidence of good classroom behavior, ability to work independently and in a team, and a serious motivation for taking the course.

This initial assignment turned out to be a very valuable task that helped to identify whether or not the students were able to follow directions and work independently. The pre-enrollment work helped to make sure that the students were going to take this opportunity seriously and would be able to work both independently and collaboratively in the course. It should also be noted that this step helped to uncover the students' motivations for the course/trip experience. Due to the nature of this academic experience (i.e., traveling to a foreign country over spring break where the drinking age is lower than in the United States), one of the primary goals of this pre-enrollment work was to ensure that the students were interested in more than "a fun spring break trip." A review of the student's resume, as well as the faculty reference, portrayed the student's background and showed that a prior faculty member found him or her to be a good student. Additionally, the cover letter helped to describe the student's motivation. Course enrollment was only allowed with faculty acceptance. Students who did not complete all of the course requirements (i.e., resume, reference, cover letter, as well as some university international program forms) were not allowed to enroll in the course. Additionally, faculty limited the enrollment to students with junior or senior standing in hopes that students would be more mature (and at, or near, the U.S. drinking age).

Academic exchanges are a great opportunity and privilege for students to take advantage of. Academic exchange trips require a high level of individual responsibility from students. Additionally, in an academic exchange situation students need to be counted on to represent their university in a positive manner and work collaboratively with peers from the home and foreign universities. Asking students to do work ahead of time, as well as reviewing a faculty reference, helps to preview the type of student behavior that can be expected from the students once they are enrolled in the course. Future study abroad leaders should require pre-enrollment work and analyze the submitted documents for evidence that students can be successful in the study abroad course. This might include limiting the majors, grade standing, course experience, or other prerequisites.

### Let the Students "Host" One Another

When the American students traveled to Belgium, they were hosted by the Belgian students. Then, when the Belgian students traveled to the United States, they were hosted by the American students. Hosting in these cases included housing, feeding, transporting, and even letting the hosted students meet the friends and families of the host. As a part of the hosting role, students were instructed to "treat their guests like family." Most of the students took the opportunity to host at least one guest from the coordinating university for the ten-day period (i.e., males stayed with other males and females with other females). In fact, some American students even had the opportunity to stay with their Belgian host's entire family. One student mentioned this in his journal: *"I was able to finally meet my host family which included his mother, father, and little sister. The mother was immediately extremely excited to meet me. While her English was not perfect, I could hold a conversation with her. She was extremely nice and would continue to be the entire week. She cooked a nice dinner that wasn't that different from an American meal."*

Prior to our exchange, students were asked where they lived, how many students they could accommodate (requiring a bed, sheets, and bathroom facilities), and whether or not they were comfortable with this arrangement. (Students were also made aware of the hosting aspect prior to course enrollment.) In some cases, students had extra room to accommodate guests. Other students had their roommates stay with friends and then were able to give up their roommate's bed. There were a couple of students who did not have the room to accommodate anyone; in order to compensate, other students were able to accommodate more than one guest. In order to address security and liability concerns, the university international program required various forms, insurance, and other documentation for this arrangement. In many cases, students had on-campus housing with resident assistance and

other university observation and security. However, there were other students with off-campus housing (as can be expected with junior and senior level students). When traveling, all of the students were provided with contact information for the faculty, all of the students in the course, and university emergency contacts. After the first night with their hosts, the faculty checked in with their students regarding their accommodations to ensure students were doing okay.

Fortunately, there were no security issues that occurred during this academic exchange. The primary challenge with hosting, in this case, was that students had outside commitments. Students were asked to make every effort to free their schedule during their hosting time so that they could attend all of the planned activities. This was a difficult request because everyone had commitments that required their time (e.g., class, work, or other activities). Of course, students were enrolled in other courses besides the exchange course. Some students were able to complete homework for their other classes ahead of time and some students were able to take work off for the time they were hosting. In the instances where hosts could not get out of their time commitments, other hosts with more flexible schedules were able to take on more guests. This host swapping was very helpful in making sure that all of the guests had a guide during the day.

Despite this challenge, student hosting offered a couple of key benefits in this academic exchange case. First of all, hosting helped to keep the trip costs down. Hosting not only eliminated hotel costs, but it also eliminated logistical costs. This worked in our case since the hosts were not only responsible for boarding, but also for transporting their guests to necessary functions and activities. The second, and most important, benefit of hosting was that it helped to immerse the students in the new culture. Through hosting, students really learned about the culture they were visiting. This arrangement greatly helped to strengthen the cross-cultural education as well as the student friendships. In fact, one comment from an American student after the project illustrates this fact. She stated: *“By having invited people into our house and living with our hosts I think we created stronger relationships and I know I will keep up with several of the Belgians.”*

In summary, the third lesson learned relates to the student accommodations during the exchange. Future faculty can use student hosting to keep trip costs down and to strengthen the cross-cultural education. Generalizing this lesson to other academic exchange experiences, it should be noted that there are safety and liability concerns. Typically, faculty are unlikely to be familiar enough with their students' living arrangements and habits to be reasonably certain problems will not occur. Faculty interested in this type of hosting arrangement do need to check with their university's international programs group regarding the standards and processes for this type of arrangement. Faculty should also make themselves available to the students (let them know where they will be staying, cell phone information, etc.) and should check with the students at various points to see how the hosting arrangement is working. Along with the safety and liability concerns, faculty need to be prepared to deal with student commitments outside of this course. Other courses, along with work and other activities, may conflict with student hosting. This means that schedule conflicts should be anticipated.

### **Let the Students Be Responsible for the Agenda and Activities**

The Belgian students played a critical role in planning the activities for the American students when they were visiting and vice-versa (see Table 1). Two or three students from the hosting university were responsible for coordinating each day's activities. The faculty leaders did help with the initial agendas to ensure that what needed to be included was included. Specifically, the agenda outlines were developed in class with students taking the lead and faculty pointing out necessary requirements. For example, the required course meetings, lecture topics, and required activities needed to be included. The faculty leaders also stressed the importance of including interaction with practitioners (e.g., planning company visits or guest speakers) as well as opportunities to interact during tours of city landmarks (e.g., beer production in Belgium and American landmarks) and sporting events (e.g., soccer matches in Europe and American basketball games).

Letting the students be in charge of the day's activities allowed for a number of benefits. First of all, this arrangement helped to balance some of the faculty leaders' responsibility. All of the hosting students had one another's contact information and were able to coordinate with the day's student leaders if questions arose. Besides assisting the faculty, this arrangement helped with making sure that students who were busy that day with classes and work were not held responsible. Finally, the students wanted to be in charge of showing their guests a good time. In this case, the faculty leaders found that the students really became good friends during the first visit. The students were all excited to see everything about the new cultures and countries that they were visiting, and the hosting students really wanted to show their guests the local highlights. Giving the students the opportunity to have a say in what was happening each day helped to make sure the visiting students were getting a real cultural education.

In an academic exchange experience where the students are doing the hosting, it is important to let them be involved in the planning of the visit and activities. Applying this lesson to future experiences, faculty need to monitor

the students' plans to ensure the schedule includes time for the appropriate required activities. Repeated meetings might be necessary to monitor the progress of scheduling activities. For example, were students able to line up company visits? Or would faculty contact be better? Additionally, faculty should not be hesitant to jump in if the planning is not sufficient and/or if students make poor choices.

### Encourage Social Activities and Bonding Outside of Class Time

The previous lesson mentioned how the students became really good friends with one another during the course of the academic exchange. One of the primary reasons for this was because of all of the time they spent together (i.e., through sharing their homes, universities, and cities with one another). It was also important that the students were provided with lots of opportunities for interaction [Kostovich and Bermele, 2011]. Students were encouraged to start interacting with one another prior to the first visit, which is why the groups were formed before the trips began. Research on virtual team best practices suggests that virtual team members should participate in getting to know one another through viewing pictures or biographies [Mittleman, Briggs and Nunamaker, Jr., 2000]. In this academic exchange case, it was interesting that so many of the students connected with their hosts on Facebook before meeting face-to-face. In fact, at the airport on the way to Belgium, the American students were making comments about how "dressed-up" the Belgian students were in their nightlife photos on Facebook. In some cases, this impacted the clothes that the American students packed for the trip because they wanted to fit in with their hosts. One student noted this cultural difference in fashion in his journal: *"It seemed most of the Belgian population was extremely stylish in their dress. No one really wore t-shirts or messy clothes. That is a trend that would continue throughout the trip."*

Besides getting to know one another online ahead of time, the students were given lots of opportunities to bond outside of class time. The Belgian students hosted a wine and cheese party for the American students as well as some other informal gatherings. This was noted by one American student: *"After dinner, we went to a party at one of the Belgian students apartments. This was a great opportunity to realize how similar college students are in other countries and this was honestly one of the more interesting cultural experiences of the trip."* On the second trip, the American students hosted an outdoor barbeque. All of these experiences helped to encourage the cultural learning separate from the course work.

In this case, some of the social activities included drinking. The university international program code of conduct, for this experience, permitted drinking in moderation provided students were of legal drinking age in the country in which they were visiting. However, faculty reserved the right to send students home early if drinking became detrimental in any way. Students were made aware of all of the code of conduct and institutional policies before the exchange took place. Fortunately, in this case, no issues related to drinking or other code of conduct issues arose.

Future faculty leaders should schedule social activities and bonding time during their academic exchange experiences. However, faculty should be aware that while there are certainly cultural and experience benefits that can be achieved through social activities and other outside bonding activities, there are concerns from the faculty (and parent) perspective. Future trip leaders need to be aware of university policies regarding drinking, drugs, and other code of conduct issues that may come up while taking a group of students abroad. For example, although the minimum drinking age in Belgium is sixteen for wine, in the United States the legal drinking age is twenty-one. In this case, the U.S. students were juniors and seniors over or near the age of twenty-one and the Belgian students were all graduate students who were over the age of twenty-one. Faculty need to be aware of these kinds of policies and make decisions about how they want to handle situations like this should they arise.

### Include Face-to-Face Collaboration Time in the Agenda

Even though students wanted to fill the agenda with fun cultural and social activities, it was very important that face-to-face group work time be included. First of all, the predominant language in Belgium is French, a language in which none of the American students were proficient. The Belgian students all spoke French as their first language and were very proficient in English (and, in most cases, at least one other language). Face-to-face work time helped to solve any issues with language misunderstandings. All of the students learned that these misunderstandings not only relate to language but also the meaning of words. At one point, the entire group of students, both American and Belgian, sat in on another class taught by the Belgian faculty leader in order to watch an entrepreneurship presentation. During the presentation, there was a discussion on the difference between American and European feelings of entrepreneurship. This conversation showed students the importance of cultural context. For the Belgians, entrepreneurial failure was directly equivalent to bankruptcy. This connection between failure, bankruptcy, and the term "crook" is apparently tied into a cultural understanding that goes back to some early Catholic Church history. This was something that the American students knew nothing about. While the words were not "translated" incorrectly, the students were having two separate, yet simultaneous, discussions due to the connotations and context of one word. In fact, one American student learned this lesson, stating: *"I learned that in Belgium an*

*entrepreneur is a crook.*" Another student noted this difference in the meaning of words in her post trip survey, stating that it was easier to understand one another when working on their group project face-to-face: *"We did more work while we met face to face. We talked everything out and were able to better understand each other."*

A second reason that face-to-face group work time was important was that the students preferred it. Even though the students should have been able to get a lot of work done virtually, they still needed the face-to-face work time. When asked if they were more effective at getting work done face-to-face or through the use of the technology, all of the students said they preferred face-to-face working. One American student attributed this to the pressure that was present when he met face-to-face with his team members, stating: *"Face-to-face because of the pressure to finish and actually having to have something tangible to share."* Another student noted the time zone differences as a reason for preferring face-to-face work: *"Quick questions and constant communication were easiest when at least in the same time zone."*

Generalizing this lesson to future experiences, faculty should require that the agenda include student group work time. Faculty might recommend group meeting times at least three times a week, with an extra face-to-face meeting time during presentation week. Meeting times should range anywhere from one to two hours and faculty should be available to answer any questions during these meeting periods. Faculty should also make recommendations to the students to meet on their own time, outside of scheduled work time.

### **Provide Instructions on How to Work Virtually**

Almost 90 percent of the students had no experience working together on a globally dispersed project. While this may explain why the students were mostly comfortable working face-to-face, it also highlighted the importance of teaching the skills necessary to collaborate through the use of technology. At the end of the first face-to-face visit, the students were encouraged to develop a formal plan for continuing their project work between the two physical meetings. Students were also informed of the importance of collaborative skills, especially the IS&T students, as the ability to work in a virtual team has been identified as an important area for hiring [Bullen et al., 2009]. Students were taught a number of best practices in relation to virtual teamwork. For instance, students learned about the importance of establishing pre-meeting plans for their synchronous technology meetings [Mittleman et al., 2000; Staples & Webster, 2007]. This meant that students were instructed to identify specific goals and deliverables before each meeting. Virtual team best practices also suggest having access to adequate technology resources [Mittleman et al., 2000; Staples & Webster, 2007]. Therefore, the students were introduced to a number of collaborative technologies that would aid them in their virtual work. Despite the overall preference for face-to-face work, students were able to work together virtually. In fact, one student noted: *"During our time apart, our virtual teamwork was a bit more difficult than we had hoped, but we managed to grind through it. The time difference was the biggest issue for most of the teams I would guess. Aside from the meeting times, I think we all managed to do an ok job with our written work between not being together and having other schoolwork to worry about."* Certainly the instruction on how to work virtually aided in this process since most of the students did not have experience working on projects of this nature.

When applying this lesson to future study abroad experiences, faculty may want to require students to submit the goals and deliverables from each virtual meeting that they hold. Faculty may also want to require students to record the meeting minutes from their virtual meetings. Faculty can also monitor virtual team meetings or simply check in with their students at various points during the asynchronous work period to make sure that progress is being made.

### **Let the Students Choose the Collaboration Technologies They Want to Use to Stay in Touch and Work on the Project While Apart**

This lesson focuses on the students' usage of collaboration technologies. Interestingly, even though a number of free collaborative project management tools were introduced to the students (e.g., Weebly, Huddle, and others), they mostly focused on familiar technologies. For example, email, Dropbox, Google Docs, Facebook, and Skype were all reported by the students as the most valuable collaborative technologies that they relied on. Most of the groups used a combination of these tools. In fact, one American student stated: *"Facebook and Skype were a huge help and we utilized them very often. We also posted our work to a Google Doc."* Another student stated: *"We exchanged opinions and advice on Facebook and did edits in Dropbox."* Only one group used one of the free collaborative project management tools that was presented in the course.

Letting the students choose the technology they wanted to use did help motivate many of the students. It was not a surprise that the majority of the groups used Facebook. In fact, many students reported that Facebook worked really well for virtual project collaboration because the students were already checking the technology everyday anyway. For example, one student stated: *"Everyone already had a Facebook and a routine of checking it regularly so it was easier to just add the project on to something that was already a habit."* Another student made a similar comment:

*“Even though both parties were very busy, addiction to social networks such as Facebook (haha) allowed for everyone to motivate each other to stay on their work.”*

In this case, the faculty were happy to let the students choose the collaboration technologies that would be used to manage their projects. It seemed that since the students were responsible for the technology selection, they were less likely to complain about the technology. Other trip leaders may want to require certain technologies be used, or they may want to require that they are at least provided access to the technology of choice. Either way, it is a good idea to let the students know about the various free technology options that they have at their disposal (e.g., Weebly, Huddle, Facebook, Dropbox, Skype, Google+, etc.). Most students don't have a lot of experience working together virtually, so showing different technologies and how they can be used gives the students the background needed for this type of work.

### **Emphasize Professional Behavior and Cultural Understanding**

Students need to be reminded to be professional during academic exchange trips [Kostovich and Bermele, 2011]. In this case, in order to emphasize the need for professional behavior, students were graded on their participation and conduct during the trip.

During the course of this academic exchange, there were a number of company visits. This meant that students needed to be reminded ahead of time to pack professional dress clothes. With the hosting arrangement as it was, students were given a lot of responsibility in terms of where they were staying and how they were getting where they needed to be. Therefore, from the faculty leader perspective, it was critical for the faculty to emphasize that the students needed to be responsible. The jet lag that can occur on short-term trips like this, combined with the late nights socializing, can certainly have an impact on some students' professionalism. In fact, there were a couple of instances where a Belgian host was late getting himself and his American guest to the required meetings. This put pressure on the American student to compensate for his tardiness by always being on time when he was in charge of getting to meetings and not relying on his host. Situations like this were not only penalized with grading, but also bothered the students' peers. In fact, one American student noted: *“I was disappointed in how some of my peers represented our group while abroad in certain situations.”*

Not only did the professional behavior reminders apply when going on field trips and company visits, but reminders were also needed during the group work. One American student made the following observation about the differences in cultures in the course work: *“Americans procrastinate like it's their job; the other students were MUCH more concerned about their grades and having time to look over the project and turn it in early.”* In this case, students needed to be reminded about how the group project was going to be graded. The American students were reminded that that they didn't want their “new friends” to get bad grades because they didn't take their course work seriously. Another American student pointed this fact out, noting the professionalism of the Belgian students and the resulting peer pressure: *“They were definitely more driven to succeed than I was. They were really investing a lot of time into the project which made me want to.”* In this case, the American students met a couple of times prior to their Belgian visit to discuss cultural differences and professional expectations (e.g., dinner etiquette and professional dress codes). However, as the previous examples show, there were still issues with punctuality and cultural work differences in this exchange.

When applying this lesson to future experiences, faculty should try to prepare their students for the cultural differences and professional expectations that they will come across when traveling abroad. Trip leaders should note that students cannot be reminded enough about the cultural differences and professional expectations ahead of time. However, some of these differences will not be understood until they are experienced firsthand. Leaders should also be aware that cultural norms related to punctuality and appropriate attire can vary widely, even in a professional setting. Expectations should be established based on the cooperating countries and cultures.

### **Bring Gifts**

The final lesson learned in this academic exchange case was the need to remind students to represent their university well during their travels and hosting. Since the students were going to be hosted by their peers, the faculty reminded them to plan ahead and to thank their gracious hosts with gifts [Kostovich and Bermele, 2011]. Most of the American students did plan ahead and brought gifts with them on their trip to Belgium (for the initial meeting). These gifts ranged from university items with the school name or logo to more American cultural items (e.g., items with NBA team logos, etc.). The Belgian students returned the gesture, bringing gifts to their American hosts during their visit to the United States (e.g., Belgian chocolate, Speculoos, etc.). Many of the American students even gave more gifts once their “friends” came to visit them on the second trip. Besides host gifts, the faculty leaders had a number of small tokens of appreciation with their university logos on them to give to guest speakers, trip leaders, tour guides, and other hosts.

When applying this lesson to a future study abroad experience, students and faculty need to recognize that gift giving can vary greatly from one culture to another. It should also be noted that gift giving doesn't necessarily include only material items. In fact, many of our students referenced their new friendship as the greatest gift of the experience. Sharing dinner with families, attending social events with friends, and even sharing cultural differences and knowledge (e.g., the discussion of the meaning and views of entrepreneurship) can also be perceived as gifts. It should also be noted that by the end of the trip (in most cases), the students really will want to give gifts to their new friends.

## V. CONCLUDING REMARKS

There is an increasing push to provide IS&T students with an international experience during the course of their education [Topi et al., 2010]. While study abroad trips and joint collaborative projects present a couple of ways to provide this type of experience, two-way academic exchange programs combine the benefits of both of these options and ultimately provide a valuable experience to both students and faculty. The goal of this article was to present a case study of one such study abroad experience in the form of an academic exchange.

The data collected from this case shows student satisfaction with both the group projects and the experience as a whole. In relation to the group projects, students were asked about process and outcome satisfaction. Table 3 shows the means by treatment condition of satisfaction with the process and satisfaction with the outcome, where a score of 1 means less satisfied and a score of 7 means more satisfied [Tarmizi et al., 2007]. Ultimately, all of the students were relatively satisfied with both the process and the group outcomes.

	Measure	Mean
Process satisfaction	I feel satisfied with the way in which the team project was conducted.	5.93
	I feel good about the team project process.	5.79
	I liked the way the team project progressed.	5.86
	I feel satisfied with the procedures used in the team project.	5.93
	I feel satisfied about the way we carried out the activities in the team project.	5.86
Outcome satisfaction	I liked the outcome of the team project.	5.93
	I feel satisfied with the things we achieved in the team project.	5.93
	When the team project was over, I felt satisfied with the results.	5.79
	Our accomplishments on the team project give me a feeling of satisfaction.	6.21
	I am happy with the results of the team project.	6.00

In relation to the overall experience, almost all of the students mentioned that the friendships were one of the greatest benefits of the experience. For example, in response to being asked about the greatest benefits of the program, one student noted: *"The lifelong friends I have made and will hopefully keep up with. The desire to learn another language while I study abroad [again]."* A second student made a similar comment about the friendships, stating: *"I made friendships with people in a month that it usually takes people a lifetime. I will remember this forever."* There were also students who valued the cultural and business knowledge that resulted from the experience, stating that the best part of the experience was: *"The people and the culture as well as the business knowledge I obtained from the project."* Another student echoed this comment in a journal entry, stating: *"I came into it pretty optimistic, just hoping to have something to add to my resume, but I think I got something out of it that I never would've been able to without the class setting."*

From the faculty perspective this course was equally satisfying. As previous researchers have noted, it is not often that faculty get to hear that a course changed a student's life, but this is common with these types of experiences [Harris et al., 2011]. This case was no different. Faculty leaders in an academic exchange get to know their students in a way that is not possible in a traditional classroom. Lifelong relationships are formed not only among the students, but also the faculty.

A secondary goal of this research was to provide guidance for future academic exchange and study abroad experiences with a focus on lessons learned. This research presented ten lessons learned in relation to planning and leading a two-way academic exchange experience. This study highlights the importance of (1) choosing a complimentary faculty collaborator, (2) requiring students to do work prior to the course, (3) requiring students to host their peers, (4) assisting students in planning the agendas, (5) encouraging socializing, (6) encouraging face-to-face work time, (7) providing virtual work instruction, (8) allowing for virtual work freedom, (9) emphasizing professionalism and cultural understanding, and (10) encouraging gracious behaviors.

Overall, the academic exchange case featured in this article was a positive experience from the student and faculty perspectives. The lessons learned, presented throughout the article, provide a guideline of the processes that worked and did not work in this case. When repeating this experience (or a similar experience), following these lessons should lead to a successful outcome. However, future faculty leaders should be aware that *adaptability* is critical during this type of course. The academic exchange case presented in this research, fortunately, did not have any emergencies that needed to be addressed. Future faculty leaders need to understand that different types of issues and emergencies can always come up during an academic exchange. Leaders need to be able to adapt should any emergencies arise. In conclusion, this case study exhibits the potential to provide valuable advice to those who are planning to develop and lead similar exchange programs. While all study abroad experiences are not the same, faculty can be more prepared by having some knowledge about what can go wrong and what can be done to address any emerging situations. Taken together, this article provides a manual of advice that can be followed in future academic exchange instances.

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*Editor's Note:* The following reference list contains hyperlinks to World Wide Web pages. Readers who have the ability to access the Web directly from their word processor or are reading the article on the Web can gain direct access to these linked references. Readers are warned, however, that:

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**APPENDIX A: GROUP PROJECT PERCEPTIONS QUALITATIVE QUESTIONNAIRE**

1. Is this the first time you have worked on a project with individuals that are geographically dispersed from you? (Yes; No) If not, how many other projects have you worked on like this?
2. What are some of the things that you learned about your geographically dispersed team members? (They procrastinate, they work more often than you, etc.)
3. Do you think that you were able to successfully work on a project with your geographically dispersed team members? (Yes; No) Why or why not?
4. What technologies did you use to work with your team members while you were separated? (Circle all that apply.) (Huddle; Google Docs; Email; Skype; Facebook; Other)
5. Which of these technologies was the most valuable? (Choose only one.) (Huddle; Google Docs; Email; Skype; Facebook; Other) Why was the technology you chose the most valuable to you and your group?
6. Do you think that you were more effective at getting work done when you were face-to-face or through the use of the technology? (Face-to-Face; Online) Why or why not?
7. Describe the most positive aspects of the experience you just had.
8. The most negative?

**APPENDIX B: GROUP PROJECT PERCEPTIONS QUANTITATIVE QUESTIONNAIRE**

In relation to other team projects you have served on or observed, how does the project you just completed rate?

1. I feel satisfied with the way in which the team project was conducted.								
Strongly Disagree	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Strongly Agree
2. I feel good about the team project process.								
Strongly Disagree	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Strongly Agree
3. I liked the way the team project progressed.								
Strongly Disagree	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Strongly Agree
4. I feel satisfied with the procedures used in the team project.								
Strongly Disagree	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Strongly Agree
5. I feel satisfied about the way we carried out the activities in the team project.								
Strongly Disagree	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Strongly Agree
6. I liked the outcome of the team project.								
Strongly Disagree	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Strongly Agree





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