

ENTRE AMIGOS

Virtual student exchange program dodges COVID-19 pandemic

by Martin P. Pantoja Aguilar for the Tidings
Tuesday, October 20, 2020



Exchange students attend virtual classes online. Photo courtesy U.S. Embassy in Mexico

A 50-year-old student exchange program between the University of Guanajuato and Southern Oregon University has gone virtual, allowing students to avoid travel abroad and potential infection during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The pandemic has challenged international education in many ways, especially for those seeking exposure to cultural, social, and educational experiences in other countries. In the case of Ashland and Guanajuato, Mexico, the ban on international travel posed a threat to the Amistad student exchange program between the universities. This happened despite increased interest in people-to-

people contact generated by the 50th anniversary of sister-city and university relations in 2019.

Challenged by the lack of physical mobility between the two countries, academics in Ashland and Guanajuato turned to an online curriculum initiative already in place between the University of Guanajuato School of Business and the State University of New York.

Through the Collaborative Online International Learning program managed by SUNY, Guanajuato and SUNY professors had added an international component to their existing courses, taught in English.

SOU and the UG had for years collaborated on an SOU Master in Management program, allowing students in Guanajuato to earn SOU master's degrees in business by taking classes taught by UG and visiting SOU professors. When a participating SOU associate professor, Al Case, became aware of the COIL arrangement between SUNY and UG, he met with Martin Pantoja, coordinator of COIL at UG, to discuss the possibility of SOU joining the collaboration.

In April 2020, three instructors, one each from SOU, UG, and the LaGuardia Community College in New York, a City University of New York (CUNY) institution, collaborated in teaching an international business course. By joining the COIL program, the SOU Amistad program not only allowed cooperation between SOU and UG, but also extended its international features to the Long Island college.

The experience has become truly multicultural through activities conducted online by teams of students from all three institutions. Students and professors interact on Moodle, a free online teaching and learning application that allows tweaking for specific needs of each institution.

The shared online courses are designed to teach students multicultural skills designed for social and personal life, pursuing career opportunities, and running businesses internationally.

The COIL experience benefits not only the participating students, but also the instructors and institutions involved. Through collaboration, professors share and learn each other's teaching methods and are motivated to improve the material and research in the courses. In this way, the pedagogic and academic content of the courses becomes international.

Through this joint effort, the schools are extending the sister-city "people-to-people concept" to a virtual educational environment that eliminates the need and expense of travel to another country. Students can overcome the difficult times and restrictions of the pandemic and still experience cultural, social, and educational contacts abroad without leaving home or their nearby college or university.

Enrollment reached 92 students this spring, including 30 from SOU, 28 from UG and 34 from LGCC. Fall enrollment totals 54 so far.

There is no denying that the COVID-19 pandemic has reduced enrollment at educational institutions around the world, but through COIL, the Amistad program is keeping multicultural experiences and collaboration alive and expanding the internationalization of education and curriculum through virtual mobility.

By embracing virtual collaboration and future expansion of its benefits to other Mexican and U.S. institutions, Amistad's future has no borders. Meanwhile, it has become good "medicine" in the fight against COVID-19, even before a vaccine has arrived.

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