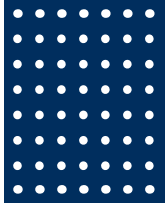




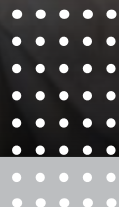
WILLIAM DAVIDSON INSTITUTE
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN



Virtual Exchange

From the Head of
the Class

**Instructors in the Business & Culture
Virtual Exchange Reflect on the Experience,
Student Impact and Lessons Learned**

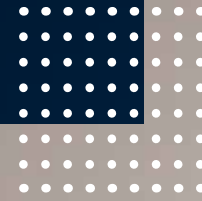


Contents

3. Background
4. Program Reach
5. Meet the Instructors
7. The 'Risk vs. Control' Trade-off
9. Collaboration & Cooperation
11. My First Impression was 'Wow'
13. Ice Breakers
15. The Solution is to be Flexible
17. About



BUSINESS & CULTURE
A VIRTUAL PRACTICUM



Background

Launched in 2019, Business & Culture is a virtual exchange program convening students from Egypt, Lebanon, Libya and the United States to gain the tools, learn the benefits and manage the challenges of conducting business across cultures. The participating educational institutions include the American University in Cairo (AUC), the American University of Beirut (AUB), the Benghazi Youth for Technology and Entrepreneurship (BYTE) and the University of Michigan (U-M). The virtual exchange is supported by the Stevens Initiative under the aegis of the United States State Department and is implemented by the William Davidson Institute (WDI) at U-M.

The Business & Culture virtual exchange program aims to equip students with the knowledge and skills of cross-cultural business necessary for success in the global economy. With classrooms connected across borders, with the aid of the internet, professors from each participating institution lead eight interactive sessions. Students work in cross-cultural teams to complete assignments, practicing new knowledge and skills. The program affords students an opportunity to get to know their peers from other countries and to experience different cultures, without the need to travel.

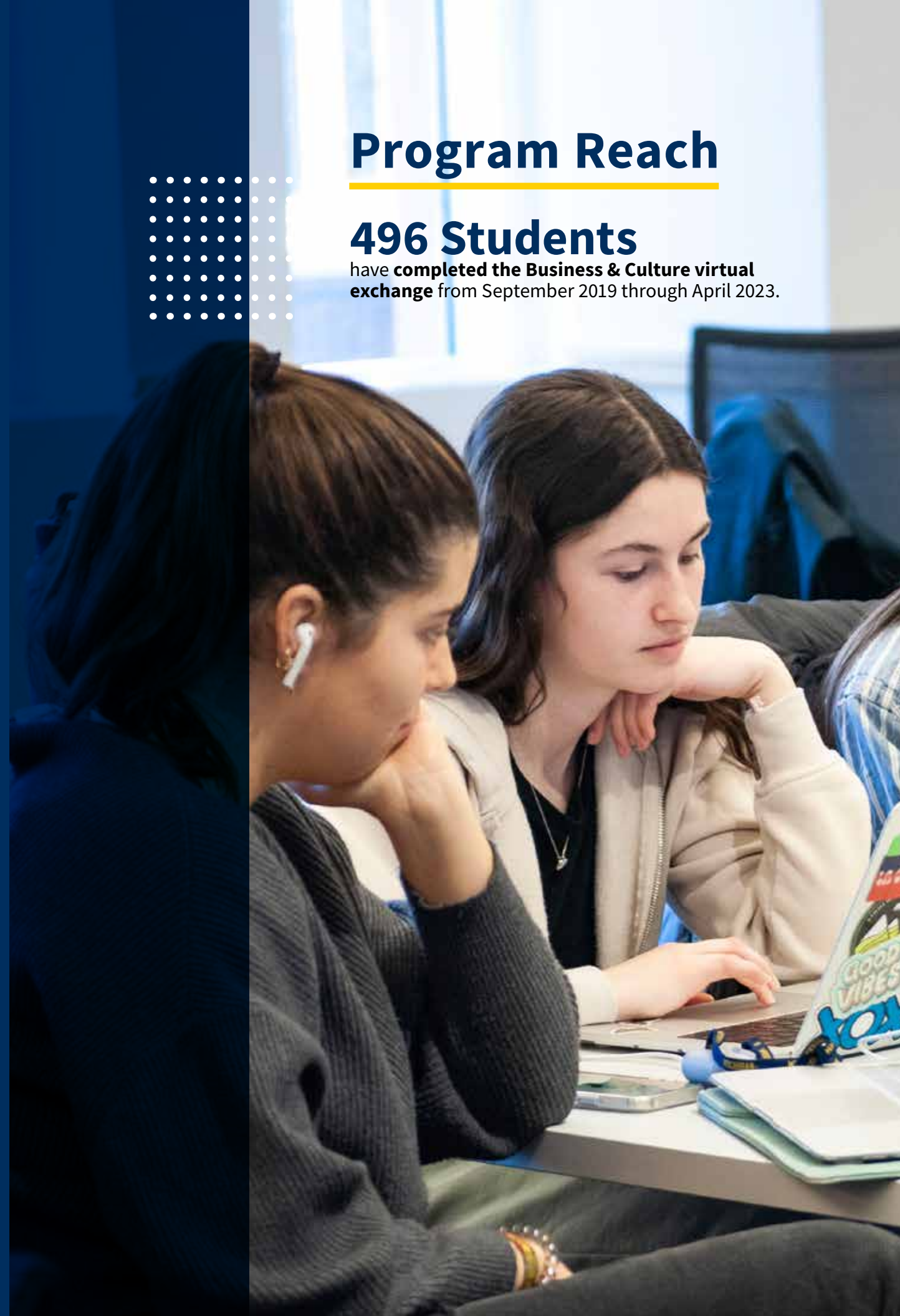
Designed to be modular, the Business & Culture virtual exchange is embedded in different courses at each of the participating institutions. At AUB, the course is entitled “International Management,” and the Business & Culture virtual exchange component provides students with much-needed cross-cultural learning. At AUC, students follow a course in international marketing, and the emphasis of the Business & Culture virtual exchange is on a consulting project, which they extend after the virtual exchange has concluded. At BYTE, the Business & Culture virtual exchange is an extracurricular activity for high-performing university students. At U-M, the Business & Culture virtual exchange is part of an undergraduate course on cross-cultural business.

As of April 2023, the Business & Culture virtual exchange has run five times. Upon completion of the fifth offering of the virtual exchange, WDI asked the five program instructors for their perspectives on virtual exchange in general, and specifically on the Business & Culture virtual exchange. We have previously [reported](#) on students’ perspectives of the Business & Culture virtual exchange. Here, however, we flip the lens and report on the instructors’ perspectives. We are pleased to share their experiences, insights and recommendations for others involved in — or intrigued by — virtual exchange programs.

Program Reach

496 Students

have **completed the Business & Culture virtual exchange** from September 2019 through April 2023.



Meet the Instructors



MAHA MOURAD
AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF CAIRO

Maha Mourad is a tenured Associate Professor of Marketing and the Chair of the Department of Management at the American University of Cairo. She received the University “Excellence in Research and Creative Endeavors Award” in 2014 and the School of Business “Excellence in Service Award” in 2019. She has taught a variety of marketing courses in Egypt, Dubai and the United States.



LINA DAOUK-ÖYRY
AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

Lina Daouk-Öyry is an Associate Professor of Organizational Psychology at BI Norwegian Business School. She is interested in bridging between academia and practice and utilizing academic knowledge in the service of society. Prior to joining BI, she was a tenured associate professor at the American University of Beirut, Olayan School of Business.



MARINA APAYDIN
AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

Marina Apaydin is an Associate Professor of Management at the American University in Cairo with over a decade of teaching experience in the Middle East and North Africa. She was previously with the American University of Beirut and participated as a faculty member in Business & Culture while at AUB.



YOUNES NAGEM
BENHAZI YOUTH FOR TECHNOLOGY
& ENTREPRENEURSHIP (BYTE)

Younes Nagem is the CEO and Founder of Benghazi Youth for Technology & Entrepreneurship (BYTE) in Libya.



JOHN BRANCH
ROSS SCHOOL OF BUSINESS
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

John Branch teaches marketing and international business courses at the undergraduate, MBA, and executive levels at the Ross School of Business at the University of Michigan. He is also a faculty affiliate with the William Davidson Institute. He has lived and worked in more than 50 countries around the world.



The Benefits of Virtual Exchange for Students

At AUC, Mourad embedded the Business & Culture virtual exchange into her existing course on international marketing. Students liked the course and news of it spread through word of mouth.

Mourad said her students benefited from learning and working with other students from different countries. Some of her students do not have the opportunity to travel abroad and the virtual exchange offers them an opportunity to interact with people from different cultures. For all of her students, the virtual exchange offered valuable practice in working with people from different cultures. “It builds their personality and equips them to work in a global labor market.”

Mourad appreciated how the virtual exchange pulled her students out of their comfort zone. “They must speak in front of international partners,” she said. “This is not as easy as speaking in front of their own classmates. In the end, it gives them a lot of self-confidence.”

When it came time for her students to cooperate with their peers across countries on group projects, some students complained. Many were hesitant to leave their friend groups.

“When you have a team of five, at least three of them are friends. But in this course, the students do not know each other and must try to understand each other. That adds a lot of value,” Mourad said.

Time zone differences present an additional challenge. Mourad said she advises her students to “enjoy the pain,” and get comfortable dealing with uncertainty. Working through this process, Mourad said her students emerge stronger and better equipped to collaborate with people in other countries.

The Impact of Virtual Exchange on the Instructor and Institution

For Mourad, working with virtual exchange has transformed the way she thinks about teaching and course design. She has moved away from standard lecture and PowerPoint delivery. “With the new generation, it is not enough anymore to deliver a traditional course. You need to create a ‘wow’ in class,” she said. “They have to feel there is a surprise in the class. Everything now is available online these days, even PowerPoint. So they need a reason to come to class.”

Mourad said her students found many reasons to attend the virtual exchange, including interesting guest speakers, international faculty members and the opportunity to interact with students from different nationalities.

Advice for Creating and Running Virtual Exchanges

“When setting up a new virtual exchange, the partners should meet in person on one or two of the campuses, as was done for Business & Culture. The personal component is critical. It makes the faculty members and administrators feel part of a long-term partnership.”

—MAHA MOURAD, AUC



MAHA MOURAD
AMERICAN UNIVERSITY
OF CAIRO

The ‘Risk vs. Control’ Trade-off

There was excitement tinged with fear. Professor Maha Mourad had many questions: How would she control the class during the connected sessions? What would happen when her students heard from the other countries? Would students stay silent or would they have the courage to interact?

“There is a trade-off between risk and control,” Mourad said “When you incorporate a virtual exchange into your course, you give up a lot of control — over the narrative, over the students. You also introduce unpredictability.”

During the first connected session, her initial fears subsided as she saw her students actively engaged, using the chat functionality to introduce themselves and answer questions, and speaking freely in the breakout rooms. This new way of learning clearly ignited enthusiasm in her students. She quickly observed that her willingness to take a risk on this new format would pay off.

INTRODUCTIONS



Collaboration & Cooperation



LINA DAOUK-ÖYRY
AMERICAN UNIVERSITY
OF BEIRUT

Daouk-Öyry said the virtual exchange model offers great value by association. “When you are part of a global initiative across universities, it is avant-garde. This is a collaboration, not one university bestowing knowledge on another. This crosses the physical boundaries of the university and benefits the learning. It can be a winning formula for all — especially if you have the right mix of universities.”

Daouk-Öyry believes that universities in general have become more bounded or closed. “Universities are run like businesses, with the mindset that they are competing. But virtual exchanges like Business & Culture can shift the focus from competition to more collaboration and cooperation,” she said. “This is refreshing in today’s ranking-driven world.”

The Benefits of Virtual Exchange for Students

The great benefit of a virtual exchange is the access it offers to students from other countries, regardless of their economic status, said Daouk-Öyry.

“The international exposure that this program offers students is something that will distinguish them,” Daouk-Öyry said. “This experience allows everyone to have an experience of being with very different types of students. With all the differences students from one university may have, they are not as different as when you have four campuses coming together.”

The Impact of Virtual Exchange on the Instructor and Institution

As an organizational behavior professor, one of the key benefits the virtual exchange affords is the insights and perspectives from program instructors from different academic disciplines, Daouk-Öyry said. “The business and marketing angles were a source of enrichment that I gained from this experience.”

She also enjoyed the collaboration with the other instructors to meet the challenges of delivering a course to an audience of 125 students and engaging them in a hybrid format. Regarding the teaching team, “We had a small army, dividing work among us, and this made the experience more powerful,” she said.

She also valued the opportunity to teach such a diverse group of students. “The program offered exposure to a truly heterogeneous group of students, much more than any one classroom in any one campus can offer you.”

Advice For Creating And Running Virtual Exchanges

When recruiting students, develop a communication strategy around the virtual exchange to build awareness and interest across campus. This has dual benefits: it will attract students to the virtual exchange and will also help differentiate the university and make the virtual exchange a point of pride, said Daouk-Öyry.

Daouk-Öyry sees the huge potential for virtual exchange, with the metaverse and augmented reality offering even more possibilities. “We can be in a common space in the future, shaking hands with people, feeling others more physically,” she said. “A move from the 2D to 3D world would be interesting and would help the learning transfer and make it an even more exciting endeavor.”





MARINA APAYDIN
AMERICAN UNIVERSITY
OF BEIRUT

My First Impression was ‘Wow’

Marina Apaydin noted that the Business & Culture virtual exchange kicked off before Covid, with the first group of students starting in the fall of 2019. That was before the world figured out how to work and collaborate via Zoom. “My first impression was ‘Wow, we can talk at the same time on four different countries with four different approaches to teaching and it can be done smoothly,’” she said.

Apaydin was also amazed that there were no technical issues with the virtual exchange. “Logistics were planned with diligence and planning in advance what we will do in each class. That played a huge role in making this a smooth experience.”

The Benefits of Virtual Exchange for Students

Students were excited to come to class because it was different, Apaydin said. “They could see each other on cameras. The material was fun. There was a lot of excitement and when students are excited, they are engaged.” Apaydin noted this created a “asabiyyah,” an Arabic term for a group with a shared purpose. The virtual exchange also has a Facebook group uniting students across the institutions, and also across cohorts of the virtual exchange. “Even when the students meet now, they talk about the virtual exchange class. They feel they are part of a special group of students who did this amazing thing,” said Apaydin.

Apaydin also believes that virtual exchange is well-suited for instilling in students the critical soft skills needed for the workplace. They include cultural awareness and cultural intelligence. “These skills are so important for business. Business is done by people, it’s not done by robots.”

The Impact of Virtual Exchange on the Instructor and Institution

Universities offering virtual exchanges are doing something different. This can create a competitive advantage for a university. Apaydin noted that it can be imitated but there is a learning curve. For starters, a university that wants to get this done right needs to work out the logistics and invest in the technology if it is not already in place. At AUB, that meant investing in a classroom’s capacity to support the virtual exchange: cameras, an audio system, and screens.

Advice for Creating and Running Virtual Exchanges



“When we first started planning Business & Culture, we thought we’d have a single course across the four campuses, with the same grading and the same calendar. But within the first day of planning, we realized it wouldn’t work. So we designed different courses with common features and nested the Business & Culture into each of our courses in a different way. This gave us flexibility. I would recommend this approach to other universities.”

—MARINA APAYDIN, AUB





YOUNES NAGEM
BENHAZI YOUTH
FOR TECHNOLOGY &
ENTREPRENEURSHIP
(BYTE)

Ice Breakers

Younes Nagem learned the importance of engaging students from the very first session so they immediately feel a part of the virtual exchange. In the Business & Culture virtual exchange, the ‘My Suit’ exercise which is conducted by John Branch creates this engagement, Nagem said. In the exercise, Branch guides students as they identify the country of origin of the 14 components of his suit. Students use the chat room to participate, and country flags serve as clues. This gives students a reason to be connected and demonstrates the core notion of international business.

“Through this interactive exercise, my students feel relaxed and connected in an entertaining way,” explained Nagem.

The Benefits of Virtual Exchange for Students

The Business & Culture virtual exchange provided Libyan students with a unique opportunity, said Nagem. The majority of Libyan students do not travel, and Libyan universities typically do not have exchanges or study tours. “Libyan students are usually isolated from the world. They work in a very local context,” Nagem said. The virtual exchange gives the Libyan students an opportunity to work with peers in other countries. At the start of the virtual exchange, Nagem said Libyan students were shy and insecure about their ability to work alongside students at top universities outside their country. But after a few weeks, his students realized that they have something important to contribute, and they became more confident.

“I can see the difference between the students who took Business & Culture versus the ones who didn’t. They are more open. They have more confidence. It opens the world for them,” said Nagem. “They get a lot of internship offers. It opens their eyes to other opportunities and a world full of opportunities, and how to become an international student versus a local Libyan student.”

The Impact of Virtual Exchange on the Instructor and Institution

Nagem learned from the final presentations and case study discussions how the new generation thinks, and how they connect and communicate. “The world has become a small village,” he said. “People from the same age, they are very connected. From social media — Twitter, Facebook — they share the same global and international culture.”

The virtual exchange also gave Nagem an opportunity to compare Libyan education to other universities. He noticed his students lacked some basic skills other participating students possessed, particularly in the areas of communication, presenting and team-building.

“These are skills not taught at Libyan universities, where there is a focus on lectures and exams,” Nagem explained. This means students graduate from the university lacking the skills which employers need. He is planning to write a report detailing the gaps in the Libyan educational system, in hopes of introducing new thinking, new curricula and pedagogies, and updates to a system Nagem described as outdated and bureaucratic.

Advice for Creating and Running Virtual Exchanges

“Participants need to be at a basic level of presenting and team building skills to be in a virtual exchange. You may need to do some basic pre-program training for your students so they can fit in with participants from other countries from the start.”

—YOUNES NAGEM, BYTE



“Build an in-person study tour into the virtual exchange whenever possible. Students appreciate the opportunity to travel. If you can structure a competition into your virtual exchange with the award being a trip, it is highly motivating for students.”



JOHN BRANCH
ROSS SCHOOL OF BUSINESS AT
THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

The Solution is to be Flexible

John Branch was the lead instructor of the Business & Culture virtual exchange, helping to coordinate across the participating institutions. His initial idea, he said, was to have the same course running at the same time across all institutions. But it quickly became apparent that different universities have different systems, structures, and curriculum committees. The solution, he discovered, is to be flexible.

“It is impossible to standardize across the institutions,” he said. “Find the common learning objectives, and devise a virtual exchange which works for all institutions.”

The Benefits of Virtual Exchange for Students

Branch noted all virtual exchanges boil down to culture, regardless of the subject matter. A virtual exchange might come together around strategy or accounting, for example. But invariably, lessons about cultural competence will arise.

“Embrace the cultural differences,” he advised. “Lean into them, ensuring that you prepare students for the frustrations which will inevitably occur. Build cultural competence into the curriculum, irrespective of the primary theme of the virtual exchange.”

The Impact of Virtual Exchange on the Instructor and Institution

Branch admitted he would do things differently if he were in charge of every session of the virtual exchange. But he recognizes that the variety of teaching approaches that the instructors bring to the virtual exchange is part of its value. “Students benefit greatly from the different sessions,” he said, “and I would be a hypocrite to preach cross-cultural competence to my students, but insist that I deliver all the lessons.”

Consequently, Branch said he too has benefited from the Business & Culture virtual exchange. Professors can be stubborn and inflexible — mindsets that hinder cross-cultural business.

“The virtual exchange is a wonderful reminder to me that higher education, like the automobile industry or quick service restaurants, is partly subject to the laws of the global economy,” he said. “Like my students, I must continue to learn, adapt, and develop.”

Cultural differences persist, despite — perhaps even because of — globalization, Branch explained.

“Technology seemingly brings people closer and closer together. Consumerism means that we often wear the same clothes, eat the same foods, and use the same gadgets. And mass media spreads music, movies, and other media to all corners of the world,” Branch said. “But at the core, people remain very different. Consequently, I believe that virtual exchanges will increase in importance, as a means to help people become more sensitive to cultural differences, appreciate the significance of these differences, and develop the skills — empathy, tolerance, and understanding — which are necessary to be successful citizens and business people.”

Advice for Creating and Running Virtual Exchanges



“Whenever possible, build your course around the virtual exchange, rather than the virtual exchange around the course. In other words, identify the common learning objectives across all courses. Create the virtual exchange. And then build the course to incorporate the virtual exchange as an integral component rather than an add-on.”

—JOHN BRANCH, MICHIGAN ROSS

“Find champions who are trusting and trustworthy. Virtual exchanges are more difficult than teaching a traditional course. Consequently, they need to be implemented and managed by people who are invested in their success. The instructors must also be willing to give up control, which requires them to trust their counterparts at the partner institutions. And likewise, they must assure these counterparts that they can be trusted to deliver on the promises on which virtual exchanges are based.”

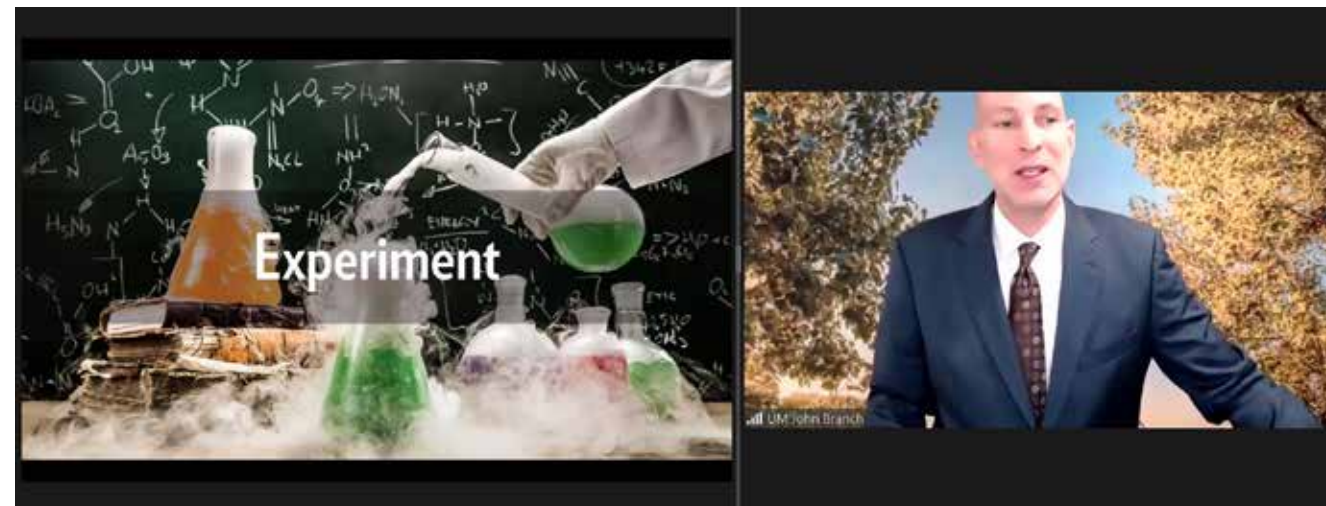
About

The William Davidson Institute

At the [William Davidson Institute at the University of Michigan](#), unlocking the power of business to provide lasting economic and social prosperity in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) is in our DNA. We gather the data, develop new models, test concepts and collaborate with partners to find real solutions that lead to new opportunities. This is what we mean by Solving for Business—our calling since the Institute was first founded as an independent nonprofit educational organization in 1992. We believe societies that empower individuals with the tools and skills to excel in business, in turn generate both economic growth and social freedom—or the agency necessary for people to thrive.

We endeavor to make this vision a reality by collaborating with local and multinational firms, University of Michigan scholars and enterprising students, as well as experts in a variety of fields. Our Consulting work focuses on developing, adapting and applying sound business principles in interrelated economic sectors that are essential for vibrant economies. Our Training programs incorporate the latest thinking in management education, consider the local context and help to shape learners into the global leaders of today and tomorrow.

Through our unique blend of field-based experience and academic rigor, we help to build both resilient leaders and stronger businesses in low- and middle-income countries.



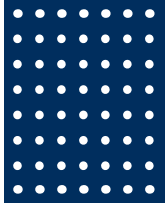
The Stevens Initiative

Business & Culture: A Virtual Practicum program is supported by the [Stevens Initiative](#), which is sponsored by the U.S. Department of State, with funding provided by the U.S. Government, and is administered by the Aspen Institute.





WILLIAM DAVIDSON INSTITUTE
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN



WDI.UMICH.EDU

