July 2017, Vol. XXII, No. 10
Special Edition

PAX PRESS

The Newspaper for Exchange Students, Host Families, and Schools

Seeking to Understand One and All

My project shows how my exchange year has opened my mind and changed my perspective about the world. I present how I would like to use this knowledge to bring about a change in my community in Bulgaria because of the ignorance about minorities that exists there. I show ways that I can communicate with my peers back home and ways in which I wish to inspire them.

—Rada (YES, Bulgaria), hosted by the Zwaska family (WI)

Rada's friend back home, Lilyana, has a simple message.

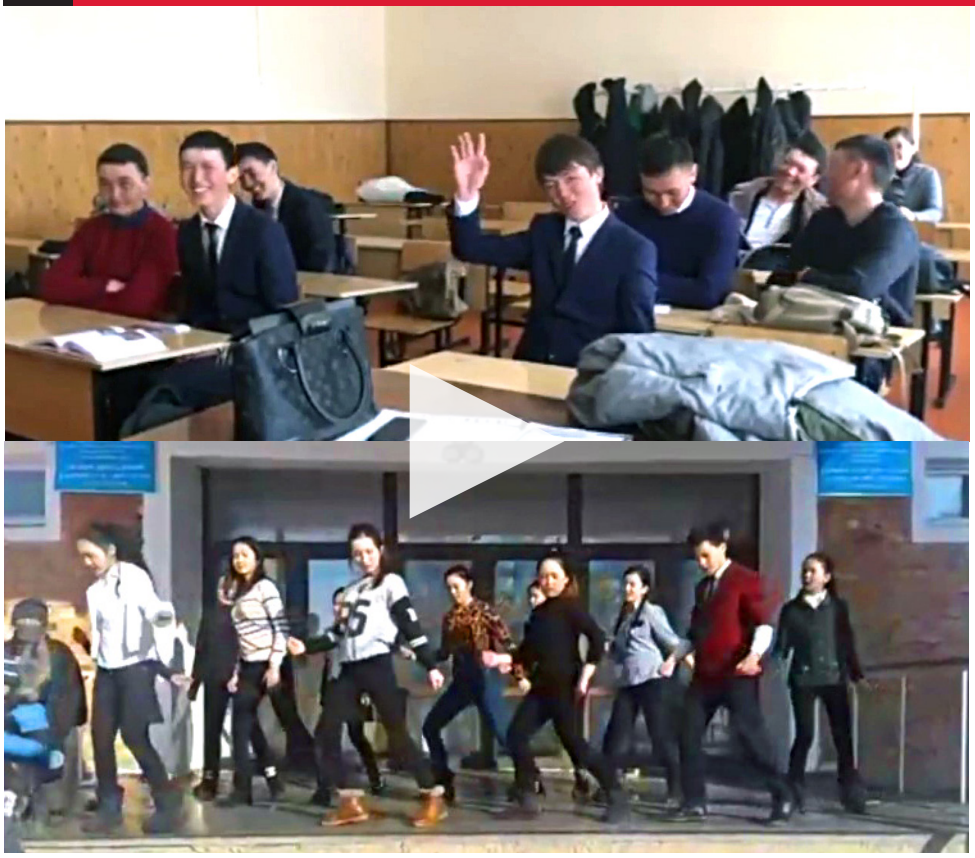
The Virtual Exchange Edition

PAX students travel thousands of miles to the U.S. in order to experience one of the most intense and profound cultural exchange experiences. That said, technology allows for other opportunities to connect across cultures—without ever stepping on an airplane.

This past spring, we asked our students what ways they could think of to connect the youth in their home country with young Americans. Their answers can be found in this very special "virtual exchange" edition of *PAX Press*!

Not quite sure what a "virtual exchange" is? According to the Virtual Exchange Coalition, "Virtual exchanges are technology-enabled, sustained, people-to-people education programs. While new media technologies are often used for either superficial social interaction or intensely polarizing political display, virtual exchanges use the same technologies to build mutually affirming relationships and foster constructive and meaningful dialogue among youth."

While that definition may strike you as overly academic, we promise that the students' projects (mostly presented as videos) are as straightforward as they are inspiring!



(Top) Greetings from Kyrgyzstan! (Bottom) If you only see one choreographed dance in front of a Kyrgyz school this year…

Global Flash Mob!

My project consisted of three parts. I had the opportunity to connect my home school in Kyrgyzstan with my host community school.

Kyrgyzstan teenagers asked interesting questions about what they would like to know about high school students in America, and American high school students responded, each learning some of the other's language. We also shared videos with national dances, showing that all around the world, everybody is the same, but everybody is unique in their own way.

Bringing students from different backgrounds together to have a new experience, including creating a global flash mob, can show the world that our religion, age, gender, or race do not matter. We can make a difference. We can make the world a better place.

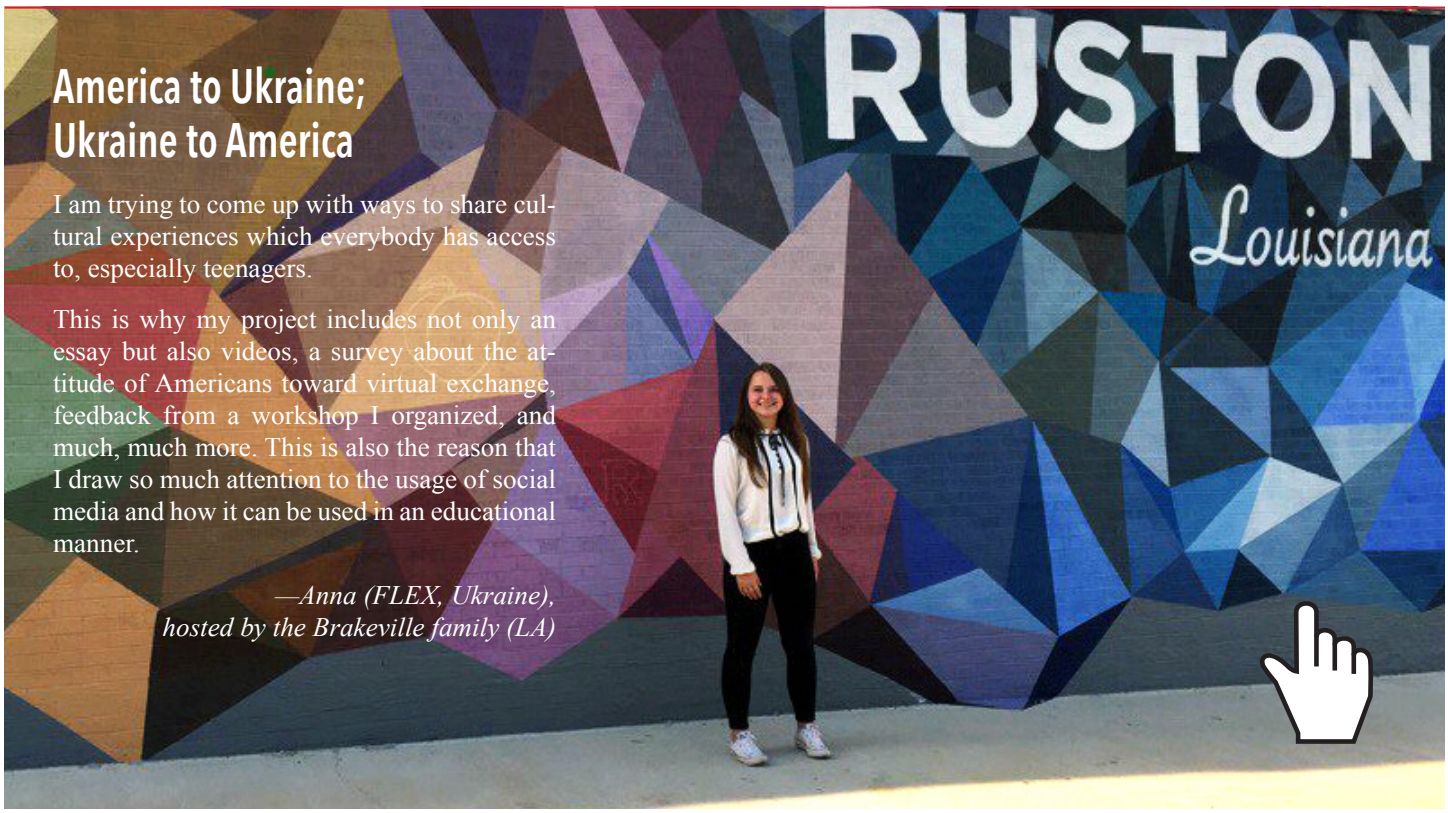
—Saltanat (FLEX, Kyrgyzstan), hosted by the Fawcett family (IN)

America to Ukraine; Ukraine to America

I am trying to come up with ways to share cultural experiences which everybody has access to, especially teenagers.

This is why my project includes not only an essay but also videos, a survey about the attitude of Americans toward virtual exchange, feedback from a workshop I organized, and much, much more. This is also the reason that I draw so much attention to the usage of social media and how it can be used in an educational manner.

—Anna (FLEX, Ukraine), hosted by the Brakeville family (LA)



Anna (pictured in her host state of Louisiana) put together an especially colorful project.

Virtual Exchange

Thumbs up from America's Dairyland.

Freedom of Speech Spans the Ocean

My virtual exchange project consists of a live, face-to-face video call between students in my school back home in Albania and members of the International Club in my school here in the United States. The topic that was discussed was "Freedom of Speech." Students discussed the importance of media in the democracy of a country and how it affects both political and everyday life.

Albanian students shared about the dark period of communism their country had gone through not too long ago and how it still affects the liberty of citizens. On the other hand, Americans shared how they feel living in a free country where their voices can be heard. This project was very productive, as Americans were exposed to the history of a country they had never heard of before and realized that they don't know as much about the world's situation as they perhaps should.

Americans and Albanians agreed that we, the youth, are the future of our countries and the world, and that together, we should work to make the world a better place. They agreed that there is no "us vs. them." It's just "us," and we should all include one another in a free world.

After the virtual exchange, my friends back home were very happy that they got to experience conversing with peers from the United States. For 40 minutes, they felt like they were exchange students too.

I got a lot of positive feedback from my friends here in the United States also. They shared that it was a very special experience for them, as it was the first time that this was done in their school. After the video call, the International Club decided to make it an annual event. Putting Albanians and Americans face-to-face made the world seem much smaller, and it made me smile!

—Sledja (YES, Albania), hosted by the Lackore family (WI)

Differences Don't Change Our Human Identity

"USA meets Tunisia" introduced 19 Americans to Tunisia and 27 Tunisians to America. Everyone loved it and wanted other meetings that have already been scheduled. I believe the highlight of my project is that I guided all those who participated through a unique experience. All of them now see the world from a different angle, because they know that our differences do not change our human identity. They understand that the world is bigger than their community or country, and it doesn't change the fact that we all have the same dream of a better world, a peaceful one.

—Fatma (YES, Tunisia), hosted by the Stokes family (AL)

Fatma's teacher confirms that it's time to "meet Tunisia!"

Anastasiya (third from left) blogged from the Civic Education Workshop in Washington, D.C., too.

Promoting Global Connections

The main idea of my project is described in the "Who We Are" section of my blog. Teenagers from two different countries communicate and make friends. After they feel comfortable talking to each other, they start talking with a purpose (for instance, having a theme of the day such as "Breaking Stereotypes"). After that, whoever is most interested in that topic shares information with others about the conversation they had. The goal is to create an original blog with a variety of posts, so that it is educational for all kinds of readers.

There can be a column called "the fact of the day," where anybody who learned something exciting that day can post it. The language lessons are posted on a weekly basis. The discussions of documentaries occur every other week between all students involved. Once or twice a month, they create parallel-running projects such as the environmental one described in my blog.

Students reflect on world events, such as holidays or discoveries of new planets. Teenagers can create their own videos about something important to them and teach others how to make such videos. They also encourage each other in any possible way (like having inspirational quotes or posting a motivational video on Monday). Some people who don't like to write may not post anything after conversations. As long as they talk to others and share their thoughts, that's all that matters.

I think this blog is a good example of what students can work on while getting to know each other's cultures and lifestyles. In my opinion, this is sustainable; I saw the excited eyes of my friends when I told them about the idea. They were very eager to become part of it. There are also plenty of opportunities to be creative and learn something every day! That is how life-long friendships are developed across the world, without even stepping on an airplane.

—Anastasiya (FLEX, Ukraine), hosted by the Shank family (VA)

An engaged member of "Uniting U.S. and India" shared this photo on the occasion of Gudhi Padva, along with an historical background on the springtime festival which marks the traditional new year for Marathi Hindus.

Uniting Two Nations on Facebook

Today, social media has become a very important source through which the world is connected. I thought that this could be a good way through which I could connect my friends and relatives from my country, India, to my friends and host family in the United States. So, I created a group on Facebook named "Uniting U.S. and India," which has 323 members from both countries.

I encourage people to post anything happening in their country. For example, food, different events taking place in the respective countries, tourist places, different traditions in the countries, famous sports in India and the U.S. respectively, etc.

This is a small step taken by me to bridge the gap between both cultures. I would describe this as a grassroots project. This is a project started by me, wherein I feel that even I can make a difference.

—Kadambari (YES, India), hosted by the Margolis family (FL)

A student in Pakistan explains what Ramadan is like for her American audience.

Knowing Each Other Will Unite Us!

This project includes the formation of an international cultural club in my home community in Pakistan and in the United States of America. The clubs can be set up in educational institutes to easily connect the youth in both countries. The club will meet once a month and talk about their current community affairs and any significant holiday or festival they celebrated in that particular month. For instance, youth in my home community will talk about a specific event, and it will be recorded and available through social media as well as uploaded for later access. Youth in America will watch the video and may present their views about that specific event before sharing a significant event in their own surroundings. This will be a great way of sharing cultural, traditional, and religious—or any newly introduced events —between the two communities.

My video shows students in my home community talking about a significant religious occasion they just celebrated—Ramadan. The video was then watched by American students who presented their views. They also described a significant event coming up in their community—Easter. In this way, the youth in both countries were provided a platform for learning about each other's traditions.

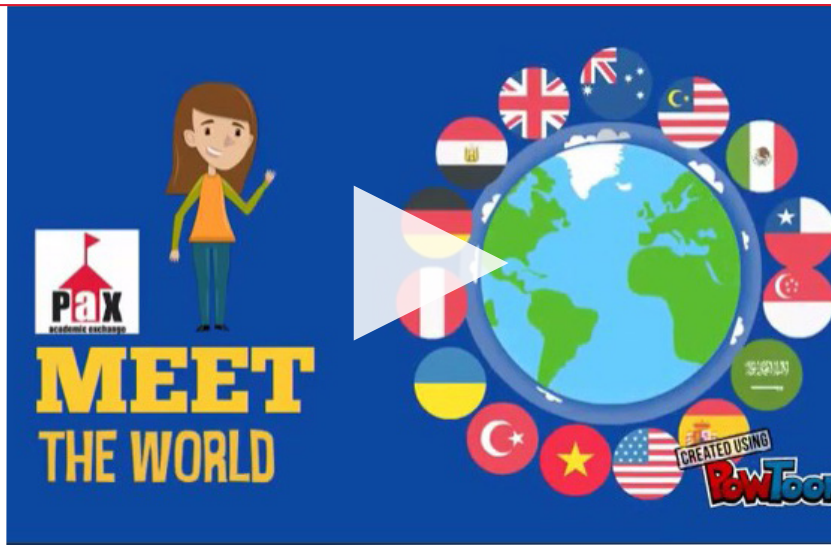
—Fatima (YES, Pakistan), hosted by the Haydock family (IN)

Meet the World!

I started working on this project, because I know so many people like me who would love to share their culture but don't have the opportunity to travel. I had the idea of Meet the World almost instantly, but I had to try it first, so it became an experiment.

I reached out to people I knew on social media, my culture club at school, but most importantly, my fellow exchange students. All of these people were very excited to help me.

The way this works is that they tell me what their interests are (e.g. learning about a certain topic or language) and also whether they feel comfortable discussing certain topics in addition to answering questions about their country, religion, culture, history, etc. I document everything and then match the data, just like a website would do.



Salma wanted to make sure her virtual exchange could be sustained well into the future.

Examples of successful exchanges so far:

1. I learned more about religions in Turkey and the Turkish language from Ali Sena, an exchange student in Alabama.
2. My culture club here and my English class back in Egypt had a video call practicing English and exploring U.S. culture.
3. Katty from the U.S. talked to Anissa from Indonesia about how cultural differences matter.

The project is still ongoing, since there is no reason to stop with such support. If you would like to suggest participants, please do by following the directions at the end of the video.

—Salma (YES, Egypt), hosted by the Weaver family (IN)

Chats Across the Pond

Alisa drew on a truly global pool of contacts for this project, including Sofia from Greece.

My project is called "Global Talks" and the goal of it was to give students at my American school a chance to make some new friends from different countries all over the world while learning about other cultures.

Students and teachers were given the opportunity to talk to people from the Netherlands, Poland, Austria, Greece, and Spain. Some of them had such intense conversations, that by the time their conversations were over, so was the class. They even exchanged numbers to keep in touch.

I have also been asked if I am going to do this again, because there are many of those who would like to take part in it again. And, yes, I am going to. Right now, I am working on one more project with my teacher. We will have the whole class of students talk to the other classroom in another country, where they would be able to talk about some serious topics, have a discussion on global issues, and more.

—Alisa (FLEX, Ukraine), hosted by the Canady family (IN)

Bishkek calling...

Celebrating Freedoms

The first thing I realized about the United States when I came here was that America is a country of freedom: freedom of choices, style, dance, art, opinion, and finally, freedom of speech. From the very first day, I happened to witness how freely people express their opinion and how others respect that opinion. The most impressive occasion was the Women's March on Washington in January of 2017. My admiration for all of these brave and independent women and men made me seriously consider the issue of women's rights all over the world. Besides, it was really wonderful to know that there is a separate subject about women's history.

It is not surprising that I decided to dedicate my project to this idea. I thought that it would be really beneficial for the students to have a virtual discussion about such an important topic. I asked my friends from my home country if they would join in such a virtual class. They willingly agreed. My Women's History teacher got interested in it too. We held a Skype conference between the American students and Kyrgyz students. I also invited to the discussion two other exchange students from my host school. They were from Germany and Pakistan. We had a great discussion about women's rights and the actions that would help increase people's awareness about this issue. Both American and Kyrgyz students happened to ask questions that interested them in each other's culture. I feel that such discussions are extremely beneficial for students. It is a great chance for students to see the issues and solutions from different perspectives.

—Aizara (FLEX, Kyrgyzstan), hosted by the Mohan family (WI)

Virtual Exchange

Clockwise from top left: the morning commute; I Made's classmates kicking off the school day; nap time; and some familiar recreational activities.

Learning Through YouTube

I am making a video blog (Vlog) about how I live here in the United States, so students from other countries can compare the differences to their school and daily activity. I asked my friends at my school in Bali to do the same thing. You can watch their video above.

All the differences are not because one of them is bad or better; it's just how people think and act differently. They will be interested in how different the cultures are. By watching my videos that I have uploaded to YouTube and shared on social media, I hope teenagers (my target audience) can learn about cultural differences. My hope is that teenagers will have better understanding for a better world.

—I Made (YES, Indonesia), hosted by the Miller family (OR)

We Want to Hear from You!

Whether you have considered hosting a high school exchange student, sending your teen abroad, having an exchange student at your school, working locally to support an international student, or you simply want to learn more about what it is we do, feel free to give us a call at 800.555.6211.

Already involved and have something to share for a future issue? Regardless of your relationship to PAX, we are always accepting interesting content (stories, photos, videos) at paxpress@pax.org. *PAX Press* is published by PAX – Program of Academic Exchange. Learn more at www.pax.org/newspaper.