



Connecting Social Entrepreneurs

PROMISING PRACTICES IN VIRTUAL EXCHANGE

The William Davidson Institute at the University
of Michigan's M²GATE Program

Stevens
Initiative

Prepared by Tala Khatat | July 2019

Acknowledgments

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The Stevens Initiative publishes case studies that explore promising practices in the virtual exchange field. Virtual exchange programs use technology to connect young people around the world to have dialogue and learn together. These case studies present innovative models and solutions to common challenges that will allow teachers, education leaders, and other exchange practitioners to adopt and adapt these models so that young people in their communities can build the knowledge, skills, and experiences they need to prosper in an increasingly interconnected world. Learn more about virtual exchange and the Stevens Initiative and find more resources at www.stevensinitiative.org.

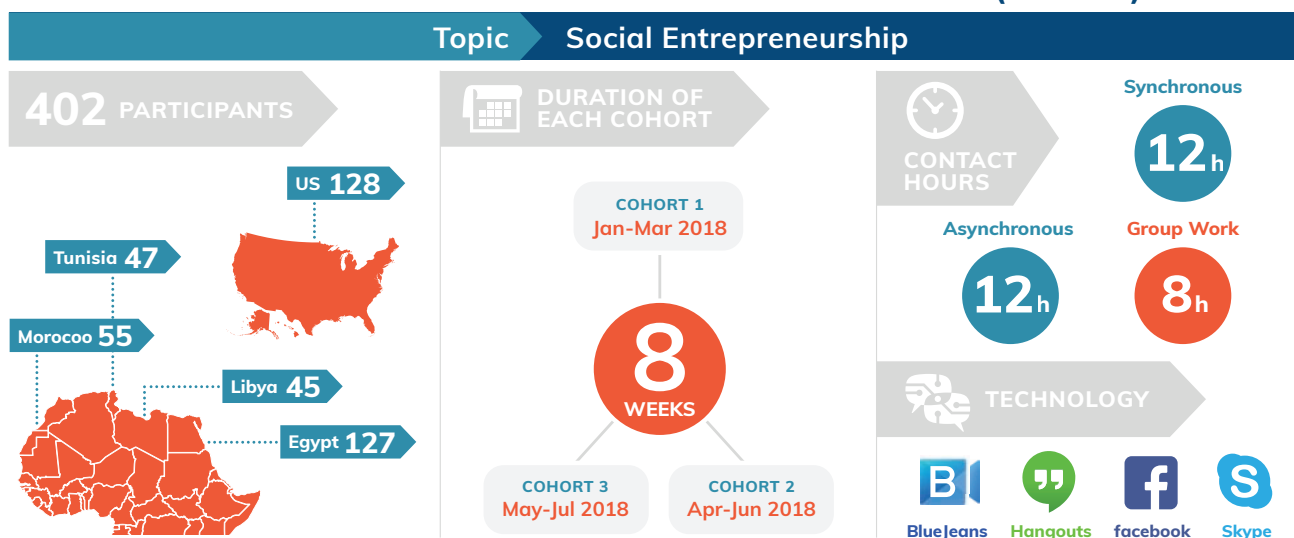
Sharing a Passion for International Connections

Meghan Neuhaus is a Senior Project Manager at the William Davidson Institute at the University of Michigan (WDI), which was established in 1992 to identify, adapt, and deploy best practices from the private sector to support development in countries with emerging economies. A few years ago, a Michigan student told Neuhaus that she aspired to work abroad after graduation. The student's vision was deeply familiar: Neuhaus lived and studied abroad from an early age and has worked in international education throughout her career. "It left a big impact on my life, giving me an open mindset, and I wanted that for the students I work with," Neuhaus said. She realized that this student – and many others like her – needed more opportunities to interact with people from other backgrounds in order to be prepared to live or work in another country. Generations of educators have been inspired to facilitate international learning based on their own experiences abroad. Now, a rising chorus of international organizations, including the United Nations and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, argue that global competence is an increasingly important part of a young person's preparation for the workforce and for his or her role as a citizen.

This realization was part of what spurred Neuhaus and her colleagues at WDI to launch a virtual exchange program through a grant from the Stevens Initiative. The [MENA-Michigan Initiative for Global Action Through Entrepreneurship](#), or M²GATE, connected undergraduate students from five Michigan campuses with peers in Egypt, Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia to find entrepreneurial solutions to social challenges in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Through online collaboration, teams developed social entrepreneurship projects and accompanying pitches over an eight-week period with the help of instructors, mentors, and successful entrepreneurs from Michigan and the MENA region.

Program Summary

MENA-MICHIGAN INITIATIVE FOR GLOBAL ACTION THROUGH ENTREPRENEURSHIP (M²GATE)





Students from more than 100 countries study at the University of Michigan, and the university has comparatively robust study abroad offerings. Yet, the WDI team that designed M²GATE recognized that an online program that prompts students to use technology and work together to focus on social issues would address several gaps that persist at even a globally engaged university. Many students are interested in studying abroad but are unable to do so due to financial constraints or an inability to find courses that meet their degree requirements, among other reasons. Likewise, international communication and collaboration are areas where students have much to practice and learn, but opportunities to do so are lacking. “The reality is that a lot of students don’t have a lot of real exposure or interaction with people across the globe,” Neuhaus said. “There is definitely a lot of room to open their minds and break down those perceived barriers.”



Neuhaus traces her passion for international education to the age of four when her family moved from the United States to Sweden. “I clearly remember there were students at my kindergarten from many different countries and we were all in the same place studying together,” Neuhaus said. She was keen to observe them and to learn more about their cultures and traditions. “I think this is when my international journey began.” She credits these early experiences, along with study abroad travel to several countries and work as a peer orientation leader for international students in the United States, for her recognition that international engagement can benefit people on both sides of an exchange. “Studying abroad or having other international exchange opportunities really changes the way you view the world, the way you view others, and, most importantly, the way you view yourself and your place in the world,” she said. Based on her experience, Neuhaus was determined to work with her WDI colleagues to create an online, collaborative program to give many more University of Michigan students an international learning opportunity.

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– MEGHAN NEUHAUS



Choosing Virtual Exchange: A Unique Answer to Several Needs

Virtual exchange is used to connect young people in many settings, from primary school through post-secondary education, and in extra-curricular programs. This type of program uses a variety of technology tools, often including videoconference for synchronous (real-time) communication, as well as a website or messaging system for asynchronous communication and collaboration. Virtual exchange programs can focus on any topic or discipline, often drawing connections between issues facing the participants' communities to help them gain a broader perspective. As employers increasingly seek to hire people with global skills, such as an ability to communicate effectively with people from other places and backgrounds, virtual exchange gives young people an invaluable opportunity at a fraction of the cost of physically traveling abroad.

Once educators decide to design a virtual exchange program, they face a number of practical questions that need to be answered cohesively, such as the subject matter, the locations or regions of the world to be engaged, and the technology that will be used to establish the connection. The WDI team drew on their existing partnerships, their institutional focus on the role of entrepreneurship in society, and their online learning experience while designing M²GATE.



Topic

The Middle East and North Africa is a dynamic region undergoing profound transformations following the political revolutions, uprisings, and mass social movements that began in late 2010 and are commonly referred to as the "Arab Spring." Young people in that region are grappling with significant questions about whether and how they can effect positive change and about their role in a global community and economy. WDI designed this program to focus on social entrepreneurship, defined in this case as new business ideas that have a positive social impact, believing that business and

entrepreneurial skills are valuable tools for addressing unemployment and other social issues. Engaging in dialogue and collaborating on social entrepreneurship projects would also give participants the chance to see issues in each community through a global lens and to address negative stereotypes about each other's countries and identities.

Partnerships and Participant Recruitment

The WDI team sought to structure the program to be accessible to a wide range of students. Rather than embed the virtual exchange in credit-bearing courses, WDI decided to open participation to any higher education student from Egypt, Libya, Morocco, or Tunisia. They drew on contacts from past projects to form partnerships with Benghazi Youth for Technology and Entrepreneurship (BYTE) in Libya, Al Akhawayn University in Morocco, and Tunis Business School in Tunisia. These institutions recruited young people from among their students, as well as more broadly throughout their respective countries. US embassies in the participating MENA countries also assisted with outreach. WDI received more than 1,300 applications, from which they selected participants from a range of backgrounds and communities who brought diverse skills and perspectives to the cohort. "We wanted to have multidisciplinary teams," Neuhaus said. "This made the teams more apt to see the problems from different angles and to provide diverse and holistic solutions." The program ultimately included students from 103 institutions across the participating countries.

WDI cites frequent, open communication with these partners as an important factor in the success of the program. WDI held regular check-in calls with their partners during the start-up phase and throughout the program, actively soliciting feedback about how the program was going. Post-program reviews with partners also gave the WDI team valuable insight about how to refine the plan for upcoming cohorts. WDI staff flew to Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia during the early stages of the program to coordinate outreach, finalize the program plan, and build rapport. "It was very helpful, and I definitely recommend a site visit with partners as a best practice when designing a program like this," Neuhaus noted.

Facilitation

A variety of staff, educators, and volunteers managed and facilitated the M²GATE program. Instructors at the University of Michigan designed the curriculum, presented content in synchronous virtual sessions, and were featured in the online learning modules described below. A point of contact at each partner institution in North Africa served as program manager, overseeing participant recruitment and support and setting up the videoconferences for the synchronous sessions.

These program managers also oversaw a group of mentors and local private sector leaders who assisted the student groups as they devised their business plans. Each of the 23 mentors who were involved in the program supported between one and five student groups. Some of the mentors were alumni of other US Department of State exchange programs, through which they

had met University of Michigan staff, or they were recruited through WDI or partner institution networks. Mentors were expected to share their expertise on social entrepreneurship with the students.

Program staff recognized that the mentors could play a more proactive role, so they encouraged mentors to address team dynamics and to reach out to teams for status updates in an effort to keep them on track with the program timeline. The WDI team worked closely with the program managers and mentors to run the program and sought feedback from them and from students to refine the program between the cohorts. They also sent participants a weekly newsletter, explaining the schedule of upcoming activities and reminding participants about whom to contact if they needed additional support.

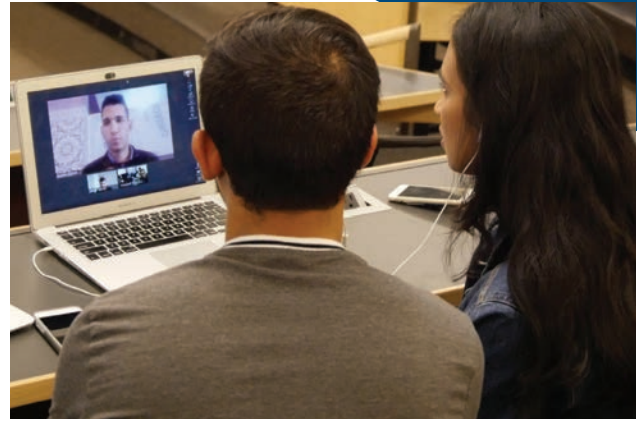
Agenda

WDI ran three rounds or cohorts of the eight-week program from January through July 2018. Participants were typically divided into teams of six, with two participants from the United States and four from the MENA region. In the first cohort, all four MENA participants on each team were from the same country. After several participants expressed an interest in meeting people from across the region, WDI experimented with composing teams that included participants from several MENA countries. “That went very well and is something we plan to do in future programs,” Neuhaus said.



In the first four weeks of the program, participants completed six online modules designed by WDI faculty and staff on topics such as design thinking and cross-cultural team-building. At the beginning of the first cohort, participants were invited to weekly in-person sessions, in which students had the opportunity to travel to the campus of their closest partnering university to watch the online modules together. This allowed them to meet other participants and facilitators in person and to receive any needed support.

These in-person meetings were removed from the plan shortly after the program launched, because traveling to a campus proved too difficult, particularly for participants from remote



areas. Instead, participants were asked to go through the online modules asynchronously, allowing them to watch the modules at times that best fit into their respective schedules. In subsequent cohorts, participants had the option of going to a nearby campus to attend the first and last sessions when all participants were invited to an all-cohort synchronous session. They were then able to complete the online modules on their own time.

In the second half of the program, participants drew on the knowledge and skills they gained from the online modules as they worked with their team members to design a business plan that would address a social issue or challenge in the students' communities. Each team also developed a business plan for their social venture and then worked with a mentor assigned by WDI to polish and refine it. For the final program activity, the teams developed, created, and submitted short pitch videos as their final team project. These pitch videos were evaluated by an international panel of experts, and one winning team was chosen from each cohort. Participants who successfully completed the virtual exchange received a certificate of completion, as well as a digital badge, which could be added to their LinkedIn profile, listing the competencies they gained during the program. Both forms of recognition served as incentives for students to complete the program and can be presented to potential employers as evidence of the skills developed through participation in this program.

The MENA participants with the strongest pitches from the winning pitch competition teams were invited to participate in a week-long, in-person exchange as a final component of the program. These MENA participants joined their American teammates at the University of Michigan for a week of entrepreneurship-related activities, which included visits to startups and meetings with local entrepreneurs in Ann Arbor and Detroit, as well as participation in local cultural events. The week culminated with a final pitch competition at the University of Michigan's Ross School of Business. Leading up to the final competition, WDI shared resources with all the teams to help them refine their pitch and pursue project funding. The winning team, EcoMENA, proposed working with the Zabbaleen community, or garbage collectors, in Cairo to turn recycled materials into retail goods such as jewelry. This business would not only provide the Zabbaleen with additional income but would also reduce the amount of material that is burned or put into landfills. But the M²GATE program will have an impact beyond just the winning project. A few of the finalist teams plan to enter their pitches into other competitions or are currently working to put together plans to approach other potential investors.

► Watch the EcoMENA winning pitch video and learn more about the other finalist teams on the WDI website.

Technology

WDI had developed ExtendEd as a learning management system for earlier international online business management education programs for midcareer professionals. ExtendEd was customized for use in the M²GATE program. With ExtendEd serving as the hub for asynchronous communication, WDI set up a unique BlueJeans videoconference link for each six-person team, which they could use for standing weekly meetings and any additional meetings during the busy final stages of the program. While BlueJeans generally worked well and allowed participants to log in from a computer or a mobile phone, some groups experienced connectivity issues and were allowed to choose an alternate communication method that worked for them. The combination of ExtendEd for training modules, announcements, and other resources, and BlueJeans for independent teamwork, provided a good mix of tech tools for program participants.

Monitoring and Evaluation

WDI worked with the Stevens Initiative to collect quantitative and qualitative data. WDI had participants fill out surveys before and after the program using questions – compiled by the Initiative’s independent evaluator RTI International – about their knowledge, skills, and attitudes related to several global competencies. Data from the third cohort show participants reported a significant increase in their knowledge of the countries and cultures involved in the program and in their cross-cultural collaboration skills. The mean responses for each competency are based on participants’ survey response to three statements. The survey items were five-point Likert scales, from one (“strongly disagree”) to five (“strongly agree”).

Competency	Mean Pre-Program Response	Mean Post-Program Response	Effect Size
Knowledge of the other	3.0	3.8	0.86
Cross-cultural collaboration	2.7	3.3	0.28

* The differences in pre- and post-program responses are statistically significant at the $p=0.05$ level.

** Effect size is a standardized measure of differences expressed in standard deviation units. An effect sizes of approximately 0.2 or larger is considered meaningful.

Many students also reported making lifelong friends. Abanoub Montaser Rodolf, an Egyptian participant, sent Neuhaus an email describing the impact the program had on him. “I am so grateful for every single thing I have learned through the M2GATE program,” Rodolf said in a subsequent interview. “It helped me so much to lead and changed my life for the best.”

▶ Read more here about Rodolf’s experience, which was highlighted by the Stevens Initiative website.



Challenges Faced and Strategies to Address Them

WDI encountered several challenges, particularly during the first cohort, and tried to address them during the second and third cohorts. The WDI team credits some of the tactics described below for helping them increase the rate at which participants completed the program from 67% in the first cohort to 79% in the third cohort.

Challenge 1: Time management across different time zones and cultures

- **Make a program calendar:** Aligning the academic calendars of universities in different countries is challenging. It is crucial to discuss and plan around these calendars during the early stages of designing a virtual exchange program and to work together to decide when the program can begin and end and when the regular synchronous and asynchronous international communication can occur. Program organizers should also take into consideration the various holidays, vacations, and exam schedules in each country.
- **Prepare for and communicate about time zone differences:** Large time zone differences often posed a challenge to scheduling synchronous communication sessions that are convenient for participants in both countries. The organizers found it helpful to work in advance with facilitators and participants in all participating countries to identify mutually convenient times for all members of the cohort and to seek to balance the impact of any inconvenient timing, rather than consistently expecting participants from one country or time zone to compromise on scheduling.
- **Plan synchronous and asynchronous communication:** WDI initially planned to conduct the first six modules synchronously at times when the students were able to gather and connect from each campus at the same time. This proved too difficult for many students who were participating in the program as an extracurricular activity, so WDI made these modules asynchronous, leaving the opening and closing sessions as the only planned synchronous communication sessions. This allowed greater flexibility and more effective communication among the members of each cohort.

Challenge 2: Effective communication and program momentum

- **Provide cultural background:** It was helpful to provide participants with resources about the countries and cultures of the other participants before the project officially began. Sharing this information helped participants to think in advance about their fellow cohort members' background and perspectives, which helped yield more productive dialogue among all group members.
- **Pace information delivery:** Program organizers found it was more effective to provide information about the program to participants over time than it was to share too much information upfront.
- **Streamline program communication:** Participants used technology to help streamline communications during the duration of the project. Some of the resources they found most helpful included a regular all-group email, newsletter, or post in a Facebook group (in both English and Arabic) to highlight upcoming activities and address participants' questions. The use of technology to communicate also helped address the challenges posed by time zone differences.
- **Facilitate intra-team communication:** Establishing communication between team members before the start of the formal activities helped keep the team members engaged throughout the duration of the program. WDI encouraged students to have a "virtual meal," in which team members would prepare dishes, share them virtually with their team members, and discuss them during a mealtime videoconference. This informal activity helped build comfort and familiarity before the teams got to work and helped increase the rate at which participants completed the program.
- **Establish a framework for group dynamics:** Teams found it helpful to devise a charter with ground rules for how they would communicate and work together throughout the duration of the program. This exercise helped participants express their values and expectations and gave them something to refer to if they wanted to discuss any changes to group dynamics later in the program.
- **Provide mentorship:** Advice and support from mentors helped M²GATE participants learn and develop their projects and pitches. Having mentors' counsel also helped participants gain valuable perspective from somebody with real-world experience and helped them prepare for obstacles they might not otherwise have been aware of.

► Read more of WDI's recommendations in "What we learned from conducting a virtual exchange," for the PIE Blog.

An Expanding Pursuit of Virtual Exchange

M²GATE has been a valuable component in WDI's efforts to connect students with the world around them. While proud of the results of their open model virtual exchange program, the WDI team is interested in embedding virtual exchange in a for-credit course. The two main goals are: 1- to gauge whether embedding the program in a course can be as effective for participants as the open model was, and 2- to provide a model of virtual exchange that could result in sustainability and decreased costs and sustainability over time.

"We are interested to see how the support structure and the interaction between students will be different," Neuhaus said. WDI is planning to offer an international business practicum course that will connect University of Michigan students and educators with courses in Egypt, Lebanon, and Libya for weekly team-taught lectures and discussions. Professors will be trained to serve as virtual exchange facilitators, reducing the need for additional staff to be involved during future iterations of the course.

WDI has also recently launched its [Global Virtual Learning Center \(GVLC\)](#) to serve as a home for its growing list of virtual exchanges and other online education programs. "It is thanks to the M²GATE program that we decided to create the center," Neuhaus said. "We will use it as a launchpad to share what we have been learning." Establishing M²GATE means generations of University of Michigan students and their peers around the world will have more opportunities to begin their international journeys.





GET IN TOUCH WITH THE WDI TEAM

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WANT TO BE PART OF THE CHANGE?

To share the story of your virtual exchange program or be the subject of a case study, email the Stevens Initiative at stevensinitiative@aspeninst.org.

Engage with us online. Visit our knowledge hub at www.stevensinitiative.org/resources.

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The Stevens Initiative is an international effort to build global competence and career readiness skills for young people in the United States and the Middle East and North Africa by growing and enhancing the field of virtual exchange. It is a lasting tribute to Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens, a public servant who dedicated himself to building understanding between people from different countries. The Stevens Initiative is sponsored by the US Department of State and administered by the Aspen Institute. It is also supported by the Bezos Family Foundation and the governments of Morocco and the United Arab Emirates.

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