



A PRACTICE IN FLEXIBILITY: MAKING THE MOST OF
AN INTERNATIONAL VIRTUAL EXCHANGE DURING A
GLOBAL PANDEMIC AND BEYOND



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Additionally, the views and positions expressed in this paper are the author's own in her capacity as a student, and do not represent the United States government, the U.S. Department of State, or official policy.

Honor Pledge

On my honor as a student, I have neither given nor received aid on this assignment.

Erin Swartzland

Executive Summary

U.S.-funded professional exchanges are a powerful tool in U.S. foreign policy and provide participants opportunities for competency development and broadening social networks. In 2020, most U.S.-funded exchange programs were postponed or cancelled because of the COVID-19 pandemic. **Into 2021, many exchange professional exchange programs remain virtual because of ongoing public health concerns. This disruption to the traditional exchange program is significant because the lasting impact of exchanges stands to be threatened by their postponement or altered format.** With the pause in traditional exchange format, program managers must engage with participants virtually while incorporating more flexible and adaptive models of learning and engagement in the years to come.

This report details the significance of professional exchanges, the consequences of their postponement, and best practices for how to successfully engage participants in the virtual sphere. These strategies are useful both in current engagement and in future work to make programming more accessible to a wider audience once opportunities for in-person exchanges have resumed. The policy problem of how to meaningfully move professional exchanges to a virtual platform combines best practices from the fields of virtual international exchanges, education, telework, and business. Takeaways from these fields combine to showcase best practices for skill development and sustained engagement in the virtual space.

The alternatives to address this problem seek to meet the two overarching goals of professional exchanges: (i) to foster leadership and other technical skills to equip participants to make an impact in their home communities, and (ii) to expand participants' social networks to have a wider reach in their professional endeavors.

To foster and retain skills, this analysis considers three alternatives:

1. Incorporate pre-work activities into learning modules
2. Create tasks that build upon each other and increase in complexity
3. Design project-based learning tasks

To foster relationship-building, this analysis considers three alternatives:

1. Implement structured “get to know you” activities
2. Establish peer mentoring groups
3. Create exclusive discussion boards for specific courses and/or program cohorts

The proposed criteria measure the alternatives on their ability to meet their stated goals, i.e., their effectiveness, as well as their administrative feasibility, technological accessibility, and equity for participants from under-represented groups. The analysis found that **pre-work activities** and **tasks that increase in complexity** will be most likely to meet their stated goal while being technologically accessible, equitable, and feasible for the Presidential Precinct to implement. To foster relationship-building, this analysis recommends that the Presidential Precinct incorporate **“get-to-know-you” activities** and create **cohort-specific discussion boards**. Implementation of these recommended alternatives will require flexibility and clear communication to accommodate participants working through the modules asynchronously. All the proposed alternatives are designed to be scaled to program context, and can be adapted when synchronous or in-person exchanges are possible again.

Problem Statement

The United States Department of State funds educational and professional in-person exchange programs that serve over 55,000 participants from more than 110 countries annually (*Facts and Figures*, n.d.). These programs increase mutual understanding, disseminate liberal values, and foster relationships among the participants themselves and with host community members (Atkinson, 2010; Leonard et al., 2002; Olberding & Olberding, 2010). **The COVID-19 pandemic has paused current international exchange opportunities or moved them online, but it is unclear how exchange practitioners can design online alternatives that develop skills and foster relationships that are as meaningful as in-person programs.**

Context on International Exchanges

The Policy Environment and Exchange Program Structure

For over 50 years, the Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs has funded academic, cultural, and professional exchanges for both U.S. citizens and international participants (*History and Mission of ECA*, n.d.). The Bureau was founded in 1961 to "increase mutual understanding between the people of the United States and the people of other countries" (*Chapter 33: Mutual Educational and Cultural Exchange Program*, n.d.). There are now nearly 50 exchanges for both American and international participants (*Exchange Programs*, n.d.). Some programs are country or industry-specific, while others work more broadly to send scholars, educators or other professionals to participating countries (*Exchange Programs*, n.d.). Established in 1946, the Fulbright program, for example, has given both American and international scholars, teachers, and professionals the opportunity to study, teach, and conduct research either in the U.S. or abroad (*About Fulbright*, n.d.). Other programs are more targeted in an issue area or geographic population. In 2010, President Obama launched the Young African Leaders Initiative, which has since trained over 5,000 African youth in leadership and civic engagement at universities and host non-profits in the United States (*Mandela Washington Fellowship for Young African Leaders*, n.d.). Exchange programs encompass a wide variety of educational and professional topics to foster international connections.

While the Executive Branch designs and the Legislative Branch funds exchange programs, they are implemented and administered by partner organizations like universities and NGOs. For example, the Mandela Washington Fellowship, the flagship program of the Young African Leaders Initiative, is administered by the NGO IREX, who in turn coordinates with educational institutions and nonprofits to host fellows (*Educational Institutions Across United States to Host Mandela Washington Fellows*, 2020). The international exchange program thus coordinates many stakeholders: from government entities like Congress and the State Department, to American colleges and universities, to the non-profits that administer the programs, to businesses that support participants during their stay, to the exchange participants themselves.

Benefits of International Exchanges

International exchanges benefit the United States both in its spread of soft power influence and by creating connections among people that otherwise would not have existed. From the perspective of the State Department, one of the key benefits of exchange programs is their ability to,

“enhance foreign exchange participants’ understanding of American values” (*ECA Functional Bureau Strategy 2018-2022*, 2020). The theory of “soft power” postulates that through a U.S. exchange, participants learn about democratic values and norms and return to their home countries to share and implement those values (Nye, 2008; p.95-96). In terms of scope, the US has been successful in reaching influential foreign policymakers; nearly 600 current or former heads of government have been U.S. exchange alumni (*The Impact of International Exchange Programs*, 2020). However, a limitation in this theory is how to measure the extent to which those partnerships in key leadership positions yield positive results for the United States. As most exchange programs administer their own program assessments measuring their own relevant standards, it can be difficult to standardize the benefits of exchanges (Bhandari & Belyavina, 2011).

Instead, other scholarship posits that the networks created by exchange programs themselves are the benefit, creating organic connections and linking people to each other in a global world (Castells, 2008). In a 10-year impact evaluation of all administered programs, the Institute of International Education (IIE) found that exchange program alumni have cited these intercultural connections and teamwork skills as having the most significant impact in their post-program work (Sanger, 2019, p.8). International exchanges not only develop new skills and connections for the individual, but these competencies are also then applied to impact the individual’s host community. Building upon Donald Kirkpatrick’s Four Levels of Evaluation model, IIE has posited that the knowledge or skills developed from a training or educational experience has an impact past the individual. The individual applies those skills and knowledge into behavioral changes, which impacts their organizations and communities and leads to change in policy and social behavior in their home communities (*Research and Insights: Evaluation and Impact Studies*, n.d.). Thus, international exchanges develop tangible skills and competencies that then have far-reaching effects in a participant’s home community.

Client Overview

The Presidential Precinct is a host institution for State Department-funded professional exchanges in leadership and civic engagement like the Mandela Washington Fellowship (MWF) and the International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP) (*What We Do*, n.d.). Since its incorporation in 2014, the Presidential Precinct has hosted more than 1000 program participants from 150 countries and continued engagement with alumni through its virtual platform, the Presidential Precinct Network (*Our Impact*, n.d.). In April 2020, in accordance a pause on all State Department exchanges, the Mandela Washington 2020 Fellowship was officially pushed back to 2021. Then, in 2021, the MWF was changed to a virtual format and the IVLP was postponed until fall 2021 because of ongoing public health concerns from the pandemic (*Temporary Pause of International Exchange Programs Due to COVID-19*, 2020; *Update from the Mandela Washington Fellowship Regarding COVID-19*, 2021; N. Hopkins, personal communication, Mar. 23, 2021). The Presidential Precinct is set to host some Mandela Washington Fellows virtually in summer 2021.

In the meantime, the Presidential Precinct has utilized its web portal, the Presidential Precinct Network, to employ virtual programming. Presidential Precinct staff engage with Network members, including program alumni, future fellows, and other interested professionals, in lecturettes, moderated discussions, and article-sharing (N. Hopkins, personal communication, Sep. 9, 2020). In September 2020, the Presidential Precinct launched a three-session virtual exchange on its platform which convened Belgian IVLP alumni and University of Virginia students (N. Hopkins,

personal communication, Oct. 13, 2020). Though the Presidential Precinct has successfully utilized its Network to implement virtual programming and a virtual exchange, the Presidential Precinct has yet to see these tactics be as impactful as in-person programming in meeting the mission to develop leaders by providing new perspectives, skills, networks, and visibility (*Home*, n.d.; N. Hopkins, personal communication, Sep. 9, 2020). The Presidential Precinct seeks to utilize its Network as the backbone for all future programming to increase connections between the organization and program participants and among participants themselves (N. Hopkins, personal communication, Oct. 13, 2020).

Consequences of Postponed Exchanges

Reduced Social Networks

The postponement of in-person professional exchanges detrimentally impacts participants' social networks. By using Social Network Analysis models to quantify missed opportunities for bonding (connections within a group) and bridging (connections to diverse others), one can extrapolate that postponed exchange programming not only hinders people from both bonding with others as easily, but also from bridging into new social networks that are created during in-person exchanges (Hoppe & Reinelt, 2010; Penuel et al., 2006). In general, models predict that breaks in a network will lead to less influence among a network's members (Schneider et al., 2013). These ruptures in the network will impact potential for collaboration and community impact. Social Exchange Theory posits that the reciprocal sharing of information through a social network supports learning by providing an opportunity for members of the network to accumulate information and then collaborate with one another to solve problems (Chia-An & Kang, 2019; Yan & Davison, 2013). A reduced social network leads to fewer interactions with others to further learning and collaboration. These missed opportunities can stagnate professional growth and innovation to the detriment of community development.

Reduced Knowledge and Skills Development

With in-person programming no longer an option, most exchange programs have either postponed programming, offered virtual alternatives, or both (*Temporary Pause of International Exchange Programs Due to COVID-19*, 2020). The MWF, for example, ramped up its Fellowship Portal to offer free asynchronous courses to alumni and fellows on topics from data analytics to digital storytelling, and will offer the 2021 MWF virtually (*Opportunities for Alumni: Virtual Programming*, n.d.). While it is too soon to comprehensively analyze effectiveness of these ongoing alternatives, preliminary reports indicate that attendance, and thus overall participation, is lower than a normal exchange program (N. Hopkins, personal communication, Sep. 9, 2020). This disengagement can affect participants' opportunities for relationship-building as well as skill-building. While in-person exchanges offer many soft skills, from relationship-building to increased mutual understanding, they also are a time for participants to hone hard skills that they can apply in their work in their home country. An analysis of the IVLP, for example, found that 60% of program alumni interviewed introduced new ideas or knowledge into their work, including new initiatives and policies based on knowledge gained during their exchange program (Bhandari & Belyavina, 2011). In a U.S. State Department commissioned review of the MWF, participants cited leadership, community engagement, business plan development, and civic engagement as some of the most important hard skills they learned during their fellowships and then applied to their professional endeavors (Philbin et al., 2020, p. 1-2,

13-14). While there have not been robust program-wide analyses of how those specific skills have been applied in participants' home communities, participants have qualitatively reported the impact of the fellowships' focus on skill-building and how they have applied it to their current work. For example, in the Presidential Precinct's report of their first MWF Reunions Week, participants detailed how they have applied skills they learned during their exchange, from advocacy to storytelling, to their organizations' strategies and improved their effectiveness (*YALI Reunions Week*, 2021). Thus, less engagement on asynchronous or other substitute programming will impact the ability of exchange participants to learn and implement skills. Scholars Wang and Nisbet identify knowledge capital, or the ability to apply relevant skills towards applicable situations, as one of the impacted areas of a cultural exchange, not only for the exchange participant but also for the local communities they visit (2018). This leads to a loss in an individual's ability to not only learn but also apply the skills in their daily lives. Since exchange programs like the IVLP and the MWF specifically target emerging leaders from around the world, this loss in knowledge capital and skill development can have ramifications in the quality of innovation and problem-solving these individuals are able to accomplish in their home countries.

Inequity for Women and People from Lower-Income Countries

Looking at general effects of the pandemic, women and people from poorer countries stand to lose from exchange programs going virtual. Women disproportionately do more unpaid housework and childcare than men and may have increased obligations during a pandemic that would make it difficult for them to tune into virtual programming (Georgieva et al., 2020). Similarly, girls are at also higher risk of losing opportunities for further educational and professional opportunities even if virtual alternatives exist because of their increased demand in the home (Georgieva et al., 2020). In a Malala Fund analysis of school enrollment rates after the Ebola outbreak and 2008 financial crisis in Sierra Leone, Guinea, and Liberia, girls were more likely to be removed from school and less likely to return to school than boys (*Girls' Education and COVID-19*, 2020). Therefore, more demands in the home and fewer educational opportunities could leave women and girls less able to take advantage of educational or professional exchanges. This will certainly have an impact on the effectiveness and reach of professional exchanges. Half of MWF, for example, have been women, so the extra obligations for women caused by the pandemic could inhibit access for a substantial portion of exchange program participants (*Mandela Washington Fellowship*, n.d.)

While women may be impacted by lost skills and employment opportunities, they may be doubly impacted if they live in a lower-income country. Generally, people from lower-income countries have been disproportionately affected by job transitions from the pandemic. An International Monetary Fund study found that workers in advanced economies had an easier time doing their work remotely than a worker doing the same job in a less developed country, mostly because of unequal access to technology (Brussevich et al., 2020). Hopeful exchange participants may be limited by their ability to successfully participate in virtual alternatives in a similar way as remote work.

The postponement of exchange programs threatens to hinder professional networks from forming, which impacts opportunities for knowledge-sharing and collaboration. The missed opportunities to for learning and skill development also impact the extent to which an individual can enact change in their home communities. Further, the pandemic also threatens to impact women and people from low-income countries more than others. Potential solutions must take the importance of networks and knowledge and skill-building into account, while catering to the needs of women and people from low-income countries, to achieve the biggest impact.

Maximizing the Benefits of Virtual Exchanges

Meaningfully moving professional exchanges to a virtual platform combines best practices from virtual international exchanges, education, social media engagement, and network effects. Network effects draw from the fields of business and economics to explain how more value is created when more people use a product or service (Currier, 2018). Lessons from these fields combine to showcase best practices for skill development and sustained engagement in the virtual space.

Virtual Exchanges Lesson: Be Intentional with Relationship-Building and Task-Setting

Virtual opportunities like virtual educational exchanges seek to foster relationships and build specific skills in a similar way as the State Department's goals for virtual programming. Most program evaluations, however, measure the participants' perceived usefulness of such opportunities and spend less time analyzing what about the virtual opportunity makes it effective. Moreover, most evaluations are program-specific and not standardized which makes it difficult to compare various project outcomes (Bhandari & Belyavina, 2011). There are certain initiatives, like the Evidence-Validated Online Learning through Virtual Exchange (EVOLVE) study, and work commissioned by the Virtual Exchange Coalition, that seek to bolster the evidence of impact of virtual exchanges. While the EVOLVE research project is still ongoing, it will use a mixed-methods pre-post survey to measure cultural and skill competency of university students in Europe (*Research*, 2020). The Virtual Exchange Coalition has partnered with the Saxelab at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to measure various cross-cultural impacts of exchanges (*MIT Saxelab Research Partnership*, 2015). While both studies strive to provide evidence for the impact of exchanges, they are still program-specific case studies and deal with selection bias of voluntary participants. Moreover, the different program goals between educational and professional exchanges mean that the research into educational exchanges might not be applied the same way in the professional exchange sphere. For example, whereas the EVOLVE study will measure intended learning outcomes like digital literacy, for organizations like the Presidential Precinct, digital literacy is a means to an end by which to be effective in applying leadership, civic engagement, or entrepreneurial skills to have community impact (*Research*, 2020). The lessons from the EVOLVE study and others like it will be a helpful foundation upon which to continue further research into virtual professional exchanges.

Even with limited quantitative-based research, virtual exchange practitioners have utilized qualitative reflection to detail best practices for a successful virtual exchange (see *Table One: Best Practices for Virtual Practitioners* below). These fall into two general categories: relationship-building and task-setting. In qualitative reports and toolkits, virtual exchange practitioners have emphasized importance of setting aside time for people to get to know one another's values and motivations to move past the superficial and create an environment where people feel comfortable participating and learning from one another (*Virtual Exchange Toolkit*, 2019; *Virtual Exchange Impact and Learning Report*, 2019). Next, to facilitate effective communication, practitioners should provide training for norms and expectations with cross-cultural communication (*Virtual Exchange Impact and Learning Report*, 2019; *Monitoring and Evaluating of Virtual Exchange: Lessons from Literature & Implications for ECA*, 2020; Neuhaus & Rauh-Bieri, 2019). Finally, to accommodate different learning styles and foster engagement, practitioners should provide a variety of concrete tasks which gradually increase the learner's demands, moving from an exchange of information, like creating a wiki site, to analysis and reflection, like questionnaire responses to class discussion, to collaboration and product creation, like a group project (Lenkaitis & Loranc-Paszylk, 2019; Guth & Helm, 2012).

Table One: Best Practices from Virtual Practitioners			
Source	Dr. Anthony DeMauro, Associate Director of the Dalai Lama Fellows Program	Haili Lewis, Program Associate for Events at The Stevens Initiative	Dr. Kristin Palmer, Director of Online Learning Programs at the University of Virginia
Type of Virtual Program	Quasi-Virtual Fellowship	Virtual Exchange	Virtual Education
Findings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Let fellows self-direct projects of interest to them to encourage lasting engagement and impact ➤ Incorporate both professional and peer mentoring opportunities to provide accountability and foster leadership competencies ➤ Utilize a standardized, validated psycho-social scale in impact evaluation to move past potentially subjective measures that might be captured in self-reported pre- and post-surveys (A. DeMauro, personal communication, Oct. 21, 2020) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Consider providing a stipend for a hotspot to mitigate barriers to technology access ➤ Enlist trained facilitators to increase ease of content access and engagement overall ➤ Cultivate project-based learning to create a shared task across cultures (ex. Arizonan and Egyptian collaborative STEM projects for high school girls) ➤ Virtual exchange cannot replace in-person exchanges- think strategically about which tools to foster in the program (H. Lewis, personal communication, Oct. 23, 2020) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Pay attention not only to the cognitive presence (the material), but also to the teaching presence and social presence by making instructors available, taking time to build community via breakout groups, small projects ➤ To accommodate all types of learners, allow for multiple ways to demonstrate a competency (ex. if the primary method is written, also allow for oral presentations) ➤ Backward design: start with the end in mind and then design around that (Palmer, 2020)

Leadership Teaching Lesson: Utilize Experiential Learning

Scholarship has investigated how to develop leadership competencies both generally and particularly in the virtual space (Pfeffer, 1977; Cicero et al., 2010). The different ways leadership is defined, however, can make it difficult to translate those competencies into best practices. For example, while some work has focused on how to build leadership competencies through motivation and emotional intelligence via proactive communication and a clear demonstration of roles, other work has found that team members select leaders based on their cognitive and creative capabilities to set a shared vision (Israfilov et al., 2020; Ziek & Smulowitz, 2014). Moreover, there is ambiguity not only in how to define leadership but also how to teach it. In his literature review of over 400 books and articles on leadership studies, Joseph Rost concluded that there are as many ways to define leadership as there are to teach it (1991). Subsequent scholars have criticized the existing literature on teaching leadership for not being founded in evidence-based research and placing an emphasis on defining best practices with little study in testing whether those best practices work (Snook et al., 2012a). In their comprehensive Handbook for Teaching Leadership, which incorporates the scholarship of dozens of universities and companies, Harvard professors

Snook, Nohria, and Khurana emphasize experiential learning and a focus on self-awareness as key tools to teach leadership (2012b). However, even this handbook is unable to capture the perspectives of all relevant academic or career disciplines, and it does not address how people learn to be leaders with its singular focus on teaching leadership (Clawson, 2011, p.539). In general, the disconnect between what leadership skills are cultivated versus what qualities people look for in a leader raises a critical consideration of how to define and teach leadership, which, in its ambiguity, can create difficulties in drawing from existing techniques for program design.

Even with the difficulty of leadership program design, experiential learning offers a promising avenue for program practitioners to hone interpersonal and problem-solving skills (Kolb, 2015). Experiential learning can take a variety of forms. Simulations and case competitions give participants a real-to-life scenario which provides motivation for the application of the content (Inks et al., 2020). Simulations have been found to have a positive impact on learning via team dynamics (Tiwari et al., 2014). Even before the pandemic, global corporations have used virtual simulations as a training tool to connect their employees across time zones while saving the expense of in-person gathering (Conine, 2014). While the literature written before the pandemic touted the value of virtual simulations, it stipulated that virtual simulations could never replace in-person interaction (Conine, 2014). When the pandemic made in-person gatherings impossible, practitioners quickly shifted to the virtual space out of necessity. A case study of an in-person simulation that was forced to the virtual sphere in the wake of the pandemic stressed the importance of technology and training for moderators to reduce the likelihood of a communications breakdown during the event (Inks et al., 2020). The University of Virginia's Center for Leadership Simulation and Gaming also had to transition their programming to be completely virtual. Specifically, to adapt to the virtual sphere, the Center's administrators also recommended robust training for simulation administrators, as well as making the time aspect of the simulation less critical, and explicitly organizing "meet and greet" times for participants to feel connected to the other groups (A. Roux et al., personal communication, Jan. 19, 2021). While keeping in mind technology or shared language limitations and strategies to mitigate them, virtual simulations can foster important leadership competencies like teamwork, advocacy, and decision-making (A. Roux et al., personal communication, Jan. 19, 2021).

Online Learning Lesson: Increase Opportunities for Engagement

The field of online learning, in practice before the pandemic, provides best practices for how to engage with students, improve the quality of online alternatives, and maximize their effectiveness. In a literature review of best practices for online learning, Mayes et al. identified pre-work, or individual activities or assignments for students to complete before course content is delivered, to be effective in increasing content understanding (2011). Specifically with asynchronous online discussions, pre-work activities were found to help students with surface learning (retaining information) and deep learning (synthesis and analysis of content) (Koszalka et al., 2021). Pre-work activities can be incorporated either in synchronous or asynchronous online programming to deepen student content engagement and improve information retention, increasing the likelihood that the student will be able to put what they have learned into practice.

Though not unique to online learning, peer mentoring is another strategy to increase the likelihood of student engagement with course content that could be made more difficult in an online format. Peer mentoring sets students into pairs or groups to meet regularly and help each other work toward agreed-upon goals (Holbeche, 1996, p. 25). Peer mentoring has been employed in a variety of contexts, from social to professional, and multiple longitudinal studies of peer mentoring

programs found them to increase participants' leadership and communication skills and improve social support networks (Hall & Jaugietis, 2011; Andrews & Clark, 2011; Holbeche, 1996). In a pre-post study of an online course, peer mentors improved students' course completion rate and grades (Boles et al., 2010). Quasi-virtual exchange programs like the Dalai Lama Fellowship utilize peer mentoring to allow participants to foster leadership competencies (A. DeMauro, personal communication, Oct. 21, 2020). Both pre-work and peer mentoring help actively involve participants in their own learning, increasing the likelihood of information retention and its application.

Virtual Internships Lesson: Intentionally Foster Communication

Entities including the U.S. federal government, universities, and businesses utilize virtual internships to provide professional work experience to students while providing greater accessibility to people from a variety of locations, not just those in bigger cities (Dempsey & Roddy, 2018; *Virtual Internship Program*, n.d.). While there are few empirical studies on the benefits or best practices from virtual internships, there are some important conclusions from case studies. While virtual interns have reported feeling more isolated and un-guided than in similar in-person experiences, organizations can mitigate this by intentionally scheduling check-ins and opportunities for feedback that might happen more organically in-person (Massingill, 2013; Franks & Oliver, 2012). At the same time, structured guidance must also be balanced with the interns' expectations and preferences since interns might specifically pick a virtual internship because of its greater opportunities for flexibility (Jeske and Axtell, 2018; Jeske and Axtell, 2014). While research into virtual internships is still limited, its growing prevalence in the professional sphere highlights the need for intentional and open lines of communication between managers and interns to maintain motivation and a feeling of connectedness to the organization. When designing virtual programming, practitioners should take the lessons learned from virtual internships to work out synchronous and asynchronous expectations and communication schedules with participants to not sacrifice group cohesion.

Telework Lesson: Workers Value Flexibility, but Employers Need to Structure in Communication

Even before the pandemic, some workplaces have experimented with more flexible work options. Work from anywhere extends the ability of the employee to work in any geographic locale, thus allowing employers to pull from a global talent pool, and research supports that this model can have productivity gains over solely working in an office space (Choudhury, 2020). However, working remotely can hinder team communication, especially collaborative activities like brainstorming, and can have a negative impact on socialization and mentoring (Choudhury, 2020). To mitigate this, employers should maximize synchronous time and try to structure in spontaneous or lighter ways for colleagues to communicate to replicate the camaraderie-building or brainstorming that might happen over lunch or by the water cooler (Sandberg, 2020). The benefits of work-from-home or work from anywhere are not guaranteed, especially without deliberate planning from employers.

Network Effects Lessons: Increase Connections to Add Value for Users, Market the Exclusivity of the Network, and Increase User's Exposure to Each Other

As host institutions use virtual platforms to host exchanges, discussions and course content, an examination into the field of network effects explains the importance of a robust and active network and challenges it might face with competing networks and social media. Zhu and Iansiti define network effects as the phenomena that more participants lead to more value (2019). Network effects have broad-based application in the digital and business world, from television and magazine

subscriptions, to social media platforms, to business (Park et al., 2018; Gabszewicz & Wauthy, 2004). Networks can be threatened by disintermediation, when network members bypass a hub and connect directly (McIntyre & Srinivasan, 2016). In the international exchange field, this could look like participants bypassing an alumni website to connect directly on other social media platforms like WhatsApp. To mitigate this, networks can bridge with other networks to capture users and reduce the isolation that might exist among different clusters, such as different exchange program alumni or alumni from different years (Zhu & Iansiti, 2019). Networks can also be threatened by or multi-homing, or when members form ties with multiple other similar networks because barriers to entry are low, reducing their overall engagement with any one platform (McIntyre & Srinivasan, 2016). For example, participants may form profiles on multiple exchange websites, like the State Department's alumni portal, the Presidential Precinct Network, LinkedIn, and Facebook, and may have varying commitments to each of these platforms. To reduce the likelihood of multi-homing, network providers can increase barriers to entry of a network, like with a curated invitation or subscription price, or increase the perceived or real exclusivity of a network to make it less likely that the consumer will perceive it as identical to another (Park et al., 2018; Choi, 2007). For example, one way of increasing exclusivity would be for the Presidential Precinct to only allow access to organizational content on their Presidential Precinct Network. Thus, when designing a platform that serves as both a virtual space for virtual programming and a hub for alumni engagement, service providers should strive to increase demand for their product both by increasing the number of participants to capture network effects and curating exclusive content to increase demand and reduce the likelihood of multi-homing.

Social Media Lesson: Engagement is Not Guaranteed

As virtual program providers increase their presence in the virtual space, improved social media engagement will help program participants and alumni stay informed and connected to the organizational platform. Smith and Gallicano define virtual engagement as the culmination of four factors: the need to consume information, an attachment to the online experience, an immersion into the content, and a desire to interact with others (2015). Engagement on the virtual platforms that house the discussion boards and learning modules can improve online literacies critical to skill development (Guth & Helm, 2012). For one, social media can help organizations acquire, activate, and retain customers (Stone & Woodcock, 2013). However, research has found that user's engagement is context-specific among platforms, and that high engagement on one does not guarantee high engagement on another (Leung, Schuckert, & Yeung, 2013; Voorveld et al., 2018). When looking at how to capture engagement, a meta-analysis across 97 studies found that consumer engagement is driven by satisfaction, positive emotions, and trust more than a sense of commitment to a particular platform. Further, an active and participatory role for a user, like is available on Twitter, was found to have higher levels of consumer satisfaction than a more passive medium like reading a blog or Facebook feed (De Oliveira Santini et al., 2020). Thus, to engage users' satisfaction, positive emotions and trust on a platform, practitioners should find ways to foster active and participatory communication methods.

Alternatives for Maximizing the Benefits of a Virtual Professional Exchange

Professional and educational in-person exchange programs work to meet two over-arching goals: i) to foster leadership and other technical skills to equip participants with the knowledge to make positive change in their home communities, and ii) to expand participants' social networks to have a wider reach in their professional endeavors and increase mutual understanding (*ECA Functional Bureau Strategy 2018-2022*, 2020; *Research and Insights: Evaluation and Impact Studies*, n.d.). To address the challenges faced by transferring these exchanges online, proposed options, drawn from the best practices of professional exchanges, education, and business, must satisfy both these goals.

Improving Knowledge Retention

This category of alternatives seeks to address how practitioners could design their online exchange programs to help participants gain competencies in skills like leadership, civic engagement, or entrepreneurship. Building these skills requires that participants be able to adequately learn and retain the knowledge presented by exchange practitioners.

1. Incorporate pre-work activities into learning modules

Pre-work gives participants the opportunity to engage with the subject material at their own pace, and helps prime them to move to deeper understanding (Mayes et al., 2011). Moreover, pre-work has been shown to improve engagement and knowledge retention in asynchronous lessons (Koszalka et al, 2021). This alternative would require exchange program facilitators to design or edit course content materials to explicitly include pre-work activities. These activities would be accessed on the same portal as the virtual exchange or online course portal, and would require a dedicated space for participants to write out or reflect on the activity. This alternative is contingent upon the participant completing the activity, which could be difficult to monitor in asynchronous programming. To mitigate this, program practitioners could have the participants submit their pre-work activity responses or reflections through the portal before further course content could be accessed, while allowing levels of engagement to vary by participant. This variability allows for flexibility for different learner types and varying degrees of interest in course content.

2. Create tasks that build upon each other and increase in complexity

This alternative guides program participants from information digestion to synthesis and application. This could include asking participants to read an article, then reflect on the article, then apply a key takeaway from the article to a real-world scenario. Increased task complexity not only provides a variety of concrete tasks that can accommodate different learning styles for those who learn best by listening, reading, or doing, but also fosters information engagement and retention (Lenkaitis & Loranc-Paszyk, 2019; Guth & Helm, 2012). This alternative would require program practitioners to intentionally design course content to move from lower-stakes absorption to more integrated, application or reflection-based syntheses.

3. Design project-based learning tasks

Project-based learning is an effective method to hone problem-solving skills and retain information (Kolb, 2015). Moreover, the connection to real-world material provides motivation to interact with course content (Inks et al., 2020). This alternative would require program practitioners to design and implement project-based learning tasks. Based on organizational capacity and technological feasibility, the Presidential Precinct could have participants apply their learning from the data visualization session with an individual presentation, or implement a virtual simulation like the mock constitutional convention normally held in-person at James Madison's Montpelier (2019

Institute Partner Final Program Report, 2019). This alternative could also incorporate aspects of other alternatives, like assigning tasks that build in complexity. If it were a group assignment, the task could potentially help to foster relationship-building by opening clear and consistent lines of communication between participants and opening them to new ways of thinking. The anticipated asynchronous format of upcoming virtual programming could hinder group collaboration efforts, since some aspects of communication like body language and tone are not present over text.

Fostering Relationship-Building

This category of alternatives seeks to strengthen and maintain social connections among the participants and with program staff. The social networks developed during an exchange program are a critical way for participants to learn from one another, increase mutual understanding, and expand their effectiveness in their future work (Castells, 2008; Schneider et al., 2013).

1. Create structured “get to know you” activities

This alternative stems from the best practices identified by virtual exchange practitioners (*Virtual Exchange Toolkit*, 2019; *Virtual Exchange Impact and Learning Report*, 2019). Since spontaneous or informal opportunities for connection are not transferred to the virtual sphere, they must be designed and intentionally implemented. Depending on capacity for synchronous or asynchronous engagement, this could vary from “brown bag” virtual lunches, to discussion posts designed to help foster deeper mutual understanding, to partnering participants in breakout rooms to discuss program-provided questions. Given the anticipated asynchronous format of summer 2021 programming, this alternative would most likely have participants engage in activities like answering questions in a discussion post, creating an “About Me” wiki site within the Presidential Precinct Network, or participating in smaller chat groups to mimic breakout rooms. Further, this alternative would require practitioner guidance to foster opportunities for participant communication.

2. Establish peer mentoring groups

In this alternative, participants would be placed into pairs or groups by program staff and then would participate in peer mentoring towards a professional goal. Peer mentoring improves participants’ leadership and organizational skills and could be used to intentionally foster communication (Hall & Jaugietis, 2011). Mentoring would give participants an opportunity to test their own leadership and problem-solving skills while expanding their social network. Similar to the peer and staff mentoring incorporated into the Dalai Lama Fellowship, this alternative would require a semi-consistent schedule for peers to check in and communicate with one another (A. DeMauro, personal communication, Oct. 21, 2020).

3. Create exclusive discussion boards for specific courses and/or program cohorts

This alternative draws from network effects and social media engagement best practices and seeks to increase a participant’s attachment to the online learning portal and build trust among participants, both key indicators of increased likelihood of consistent communication (Smith & Gallicano 2015; Guth & Helm 2012). This alternative aims to increase the perception of inclusivity of the network and thus increase a participant’s commitment to the subject material. Sustained commitment is necessary for open and sustained lines of communication among participants, and increases the likelihood that participants take on an active role on the network (De Oliveira Santini et al., 2020). Program practitioners would create cohorts for specific online programs and exclusive discussion boards for them to discuss program topics. Program practitioners would also need to divide network users by cohort as applicable and continue to monitor cohort discussion boards and facilitate conversations and questions, as necessary.

Evaluative Criteria

The criteria seek to assess the effectiveness of the alternatives in meeting their stated goals and their ease of use for the practitioners and participants, particularly for those from under-represented groups. As a small organization of four staff members, it was important to Presidential Precinct that the alternatives be reasonably feasible to implement, mitigating staff time constraints to learn new technology and design and implement program materials. Since most program participants will be accessing course materials from countries with vastly differing degrees of access to technology and internet capabilities, the Presidential Precinct also wanted to ensure that any proposed alternatives be reasonably accessible.

1. Organizational Feasibility

This criterion will measure the ease of organization feasibility for the program practitioner. Incorporating metrics like an alternative's cost, additional skills or technology training required, and required degree of practitioner involvement, this criterion will categorize alternatives as low, medium, or high. High organizational feasibility indicates that an alternative requires little to no new costs, additional skills, or technology for practitioners to learn, and practitioners can implement the alternative in one session (e.g., modifying curriculum but then no further action required). Medium indicates that the alternative costs \$500 or less, requires practitioners or learn new skills or technology, or requires consistent practitioner involvement. Low organizational feasibility indicates the alternative costs \$500 or more, requires significant training in skills or technology over multiple sessions, or requires constant practitioner involvement. In the case that an alternative requires a mixture of organizational demand, such as low cost but high technological training, the organizational feasibility dimensions will be weighted based on client importance to assess the net categorization of low, medium, or high. The data for assessing this criterion will come from the literature on the proposed alternatives and by interviewing the client to assess technological and practitioner involvement scores.

2. Technological Accessibility

It is highly likely that participants will need to access upcoming programming from their home countries, and their circumstances could vary widely regarding access to an internet connection, a streaming device, or other communication tools. This criterion's categorization to some degree depends on forthcoming information from the Department of State as to what technological equipment the Department will provide to participants, like internet hotspots or laptops. Even with some unknowns, this alternative categorizes alternatives as low, medium, or high in technological accessibility. A high score of technological access indicates a high degree of flexible access to content, including little to no downloaded materials and full asynchronous capabilities. A medium score indicates some flexible access to content, but some downloaded materials required and/or some synchronous sessions. A low degree of technological accessibility indicates the material requires a consistent reliable internet connection for synchronous content and/or downloading materials, or requires special technology to access content. This will be measured by examining the self-reported technological requirements of various platforms.

3. Equity of program access to women and people from low-income countries

This criterion measures how well under-served populations, like women and those from low-income countries, can benefit from the alternatives. Alternatives will be categorized as either high, medium, or low on their equity score. A high equity score indicates that an alternative improves accessibility specifically for under-served populations. A medium score indicates the alternative provides no additional provisions for under-served populations. A low equity score indicates that under-served populations stand to be disadvantaged by the alternative. The information for assessing this criterion will come from literature on telework and virtual exchanges and their impact on under-served populations.

4. Degree of knowledge retention

Specifically for alternatives tasked with improving knowledge retention, this criterion will assess a participant's ability to gain and retain key competencies through the proposed alternatives. This will be measured as either a high, medium, or low degree of knowledge retention. If there is no academic research on how the proposed alternatives apply to international professional exchanges, they will instead be measured by assessing the alternatives against existing literature in related fields like online learning and competency-building.

5. Likelihood of increased connection

Specifically for alternatives concerned with fostering relationship-building, this criterion seeks to measure how likely it is that each alternative will increase connections among participants. This will be categorized as either a high, medium, or low likelihood. It will be measured by examining the existing literature on communication, and assessing how effective the proposed alternatives were in other research of improving communication among individuals. This criterion assumes that participants will attempt to engage with each alternative in good faith, but it is possible that technological issues could undermine any alternative's likelihood of connection score, and this will need to be noted in the evaluation.

Evaluation of Alternatives

Alternatives that Address Fostering and Retaining Skills

1. Incorporate pre-work activities into learning modules

Organizational Feasibility: High

This alternative ranks highly organizationally feasible because it utilizes the organization's existing technology platform, the Presidential Precinct, and can be implemented with minimal disruptions to the practitioners' time. As practitioners develop their online exchange modules, practitioners would modify existing curriculum to include pre-work activities. Since the existing exchange curriculum will already need to be modified for a virtual format, practitioners can research and design pre-work activities during their general curriculum development. These activities could include questions to prime participants for future discussions, short journal prompts, or articles to read before a larger group activity. Once the pre-work is designed, practitioner involvement is minimal and mainly involves answering clarifying questions or monitoring completion of the activities, as necessary.

Technological Accessibility: High

Pre-work materials are highly technologically accessible because they can be accessed remotely and asynchronously, and utilize the same platform as the program content. Participants are not required to download any materials or navigate a new platform, which might impede access. This rating of high technological accessibility assumes that participants can access the existing platform with the resources provided by the State Department or through their mobile phones.

Equity of program access to women and people from low-income countries: High

Contingent upon their design, pre-work activities stand to improve accessibility of materials for under-served populations. If delivered asynchronously, this alternative would cater to participants in low-income countries who might not be able to interact with synchronous content as easily as participants in higher-income countries (Brussevich et al., 2020). During the pandemic, women's main barrier to access to materials has been because of their additional expected duties in the home, and these additional duties make it hard for them to tune into virtual programming (Georgieva et al., 2020). However, the asynchronous format of pre-work activities provides flexibility for women to access and interact with course materials at a time that better fits their schedules.

Degree of knowledge retention: Medium

Because of the lack of research on asynchronous pre-work and its effect on knowledge retention for asynchronously delivered materials, there is no certainty that this alternative will be highly effective. The existing research into pre-work's effect on knowledge retention focuses on pre-work before a synchronous course, where participants have an opportunity to ask clarifying questions from the instructor (Mayes et al., 2011; *Flipped Classroom for Health Professionals Education*, 2019). The nature of the asynchronous delivery of virtual programming may make it difficult for participants to gain clarity before moving forward with new information, and leaves the impetus on the learner to reach out for assistance, which they might be unwilling or unable to do. In the instance that pre-work has been conducted before participants used an online discussion board, pre-work provided participants a useful "information scaffold" upon which to build and discuss higher-order thinking, like reflection and analysis (Koszalka et al., 2021). One can be reasonably confident that asynchronously delivered pre-work would have a similar effect on a participant's ability to retain and apply information, especially since the Presidential Precinct Network already utilizes discussion boards. To improve the likelihood of increased knowledge retention, practitioners could schedule in check-ins to allow for questions, though this would have to be balanced with organizational capacity to individually check in with participants.

2. Create tasks that build upon each other and increase in complexity

Organizational Feasibility: Medium

Re-designing the course curriculum to include tasks that increase in complexity ranks as medium for organizational feasibility. While these tasks could be incorporated into the Presidential Precinct Network, thus requiring no new technology for program practitioners, this alternative would require dedicated use of practitioner time. Practitioners would need to research different learning styles and intentionally design tasks that not only accommodate these different learning styles, but also build in complexity. It might be difficult for practitioners to both design this type of content and ensure that these tasks can be completed asynchronously. Like the pre-work alternative, to be most effective, this alternative would need some sort of accountability measure to ensure participants complete and engage with course material, such as requiring submission of materials before more complex materials could be accessed. Program staff would be involved not only in the design of this

alternative, but also would need to be available to answer questions or provide feedback on work, which would be challenging for a small staff given their other larger program-related commitments.

Technological Accessibility: High

Like pre-work activities, tasks with increasing complexity stand to be highly technologically accessible. The tasks could still be offered asynchronously and through the Presidential Precinct Network, which would not require additional resources or bandwidth from the participants. This assessment is contingent upon participants' access to the course materials on the Presidential Precinct through a State Department-provided device or mobile device, plus access to an internet connection.

Equity of program access to women and people from low-income countries: Medium

Because this alternative provides uniform tasks for all participants that increase in cognitive complexity, it ranks as medium for equity because there are no extra provisions specifically for under-served populations. However, the very nature of the asynchronous offering of the tasks allows for flexibility stands to benefit all participants, but particularly those in low-income countries with unreliable access to internet connection or women and girls who have increased responsibilities in the home because of the pandemic.

Degree of knowledge retention: High

Research supports that designing tasks with increasing complexity improves information retention (Lenkaitis & Loranc-Paszylk, 2019; Guth & Helm, 2012). Further, the variety of tasks offered can also accommodate different learning styles, and personalizing tasks to different learning styles has been attributed to improved understanding of key concepts and students retaining concepts for longer periods of time (Rasheed & Wahid, 2021). Designing tasks that not only build upon each other in cognitive load, but also incorporate different learning styles stands to be highly effective in increasing knowledge retention.

3. Design project-based learning tasks

Organizational Feasibility: Low

While external costs to implement project-based learning tasks are minimal, this alternative ranks low in organizational feasibility because of the degree of practitioner involvement required. For one, Presidential Precinct staff would need to design new project-based learning tasks or transfer over in-person project-based learning tasks to a virtual format. They would also need to be available to provide guidance as participants worked on their projects. To maximize the projects' effectiveness, staff would need to provide feedback or facilitate a discussion with participants about lessons learned, which would need to be carefully designed to be offered asynchronously. Given the Presidential Precinct's small staff and the other responsibilities they manage while running the virtual exchange, these projects would likely take valuable time and reduce the amount of material the organization strives to cover in their program curriculum.

Technological Accessibility: Low

Even with thoughtful program design, project-based learning will likely rank low in technological accessibility. Group projects would benefit from synchronous communication, which would be difficult to navigate with various time zones and access to reliable internet connections. Asynchronous group communication on a project would likely take time away from other learning modules, and could impede the amount of information participants are able to absorb during their exchange. Even an individual business or project pitch to practice public speaking and project

management skills, for example, would require participant access to a camera and the ability to upload the video, as well as download or streaming capabilities for others to watch it. All of these technological necessities would make it difficult for all participants to fully reap the benefits of the project-based learning.

Equity of program access to women and people from low-income countries: Low

This alternative ranks low in equity because the technological constraints stand to disadvantage participants in low-income countries without reliable access to an internet connection or communication devices. The nature of the project-based design is less flexible in access options because it likely requires participants to download or upload materials and potentially participate in synchronous communication sessions for group projects.

Degree of knowledge retention: High

Project-based learning tasks are an effective method to increase participant engagement with course material and retain information (Kolb, 2015, Inks et al., 2020). This alternative ranks as high because project-based learning tasks stand to be highly effective in increasing the degree of knowledge retention, improving the likelihood that participants will apply that information in the future.

Alternatives that Address Relationship-Building

1. Create structured “get-to-know-you” activities

Organizational Feasibility: Medium

While this alternative has no additional external costs and can be utilized within the Presidential Precinct Network, the high administrative involvement brings its feasibility score to medium. Practitioners would need to design get-to-know-you activities that are accessible to participants in a variety of countries, which could be difficult to do. Further, practitioners would need to monitor and facilitate the activities to help encourage participants’ relationship-building. The small staff size and their other obligations during the exchange would need to be balanced with capacity to design and implement this alternative.

Technological Accessibility: Medium

The asynchronous options for “get-to-know-you” activities are designed to allow some flexible access to content and no downloaded materials required. Ideally, participants would communicate in relatively close succession to one another, albeit asynchronously, to keep the conversation moving in a direction of mutual interests for all participants. This communication timeline would be difficult for participants in countries with unreliable access to the internet. Thus, the alternative ranks overall as medium for technological accessibility.

Equity of program access to women and people from low-income countries: Medium

Because this alternative offers no special considerations for under-served populations, it ranks as medium for its equity score. The type of activity offered will further determine its equity score. A synchronous brown bag discussion, for example, would disproportionately disadvantage people from low-income countries, while an asynchronous discussion post would provide more flexible and equitable access for those with limited internet capabilities or increased domestic responsibilities.

Likelihood of Increased Connection: High

Research in education pedagogy has validated “get-to-know-you” activities as an effective way to increase course engagement and to build community by increasing positive associations among students and with their instructor (Sawyer et al., 2009). This alternative is also recommended by virtual exchange practitioners as a way to facilitate discussion past the superficial and into the substantive (*Virtual Exchange Toolkit*, 2019; *Virtual Exchange Impact and Learning Report*, 2019). Thus, these activities are highly likely to increase connections among participants. However, most “get-to-know-you” activities have been studied in synchronous or in-person interactions, and there might be reasons to think that asynchronous options would not have the same degree of effectiveness, such as halted conversations and lack of spontaneous discussions. This caveat will require extra practitioner awareness to monitor and encourage engagement in the activities to maximize the potential for increased connections.

2. Establish peer mentoring groups

Organizational Feasibility: Low

This alternative ranks low in administrative feasibility because of the new skills required for program practitioners and the time involved in its implementation. This alternative would require program practitioners to become trained in how to mentor and how to teach mentoring to participants from various cultural backgrounds. Then, practitioners would have to pair up participants, explain the benefits of peer mentoring to garner buy-in, train participants how to be a peer mentor, and monitor and mitigate any issues that may arise. This would require a significant amount of time in addition to facilitating the exchange program curriculum.

Technological Accessibility: Medium

Even if peer mentoring training materials could be provided to participants asynchronously and there were no downloaded materials required, the necessary synchronous communication of a peer mentoring session would make this alternative rank medium in technological accessibility. Internet connection issues make it difficult for peer mentors to find a consistent mode of communication, which would reduce the effectiveness of this alternative.

Equity of program access to women and people from low-income countries: Low

This alternative ranks low in its equity score because those with reliable access to an internet connection would stand to benefit more than those without. Synchronous sessions could disadvantage women, who may have additional responsibilities during the pandemic, and people in lower-income countries without adequate internet infrastructure.

Likelihood of increased connection: Medium

Research supports that peer mentoring increases participants’ communication skills and expands their social networks (Hall & Jaugietis, 2011; Andrews & Clark, 2011; Holbeche, 1996). However, the research does not differentiate between the impact of peer mentoring for connection-building versus competency-building, which makes it difficult to assess to what degree peer mentoring will specifically increase connection. Given this ambiguity, this alternative ranks as medium in its likelihood to lead to increased connections among participants.

3. Create exclusive discussion boards for specific courses and/or program cohorts

Organizational Feasibility: High

This alternative utilizes the existing organizational hub, the Presidential Precinct Network, and does not require practitioners to learn new technology or skills. It would take staff time to create a separate hub for different exchange program cohorts, though this action could be accomplished during the onboarding of each program cohort. The discussion boards might benefit from practitioner involvement to further conversation, which would require additional practitioner time. However, Presidential Precinct staff already participate and post on the Presidential Precinct Network, so this is unlikely to require an undue additional burden on staff time.

Technological Accessibility: High

The cohort discussion boards would be a part of the Presidential Precinct Network, thus requiring no new technology for participants. The discussion boards would be completely asynchronous and accessible to participants at their convenience, making them highly technologically accessible.

Equity of program access to women and people from low-income countries: High

The asynchronous discussion boards improve accessibility specifically for women and people from low-income countries, making this alternative rank high in its equity score. Those with increased domestic demands and without reliable access to the internet stand to benefit more from asynchronous discussion boards which are flexible by design.

Likelihood of Increased Connection: Medium

While a unique discussion board for specific cohorts will increase the perceived exclusivity of the network, the likelihood of increased connection is contingent upon participant use of the discussion board (Park et al., 2018; Choi, 2007). Further, social media research has found that users are more likely to be engaged in a platform that gives them an active and participatory role, rather than one passively absorbing information (De Oliveira Santini et al., 2020). To capitalize on this, practitioners should encourage participants to pose questions or insights rather than facts or announcements to increase the likelihood that the posts lead to further discussion and thus an increased connection. Thus, by practitioners assisting participants to utilize the discussion board in a way that increases the quality of information shared, this alternative will have a medium likelihood of increased connections.

Outcomes Matrix

	Foster and Retain Skills			Expand Social Networks		
	Pre-Work Activities	Increasing Task Complexity	Project-Based Learning	Get-to-Know-You Activities	Peer Mentoring Groups	Exclusive Discussion Boards
Organizational Feasibility	High	Medium	Low	Medium	Low	High
Technological Accessibility	High	High	Low	Medium	Medium	High
Equity of Program Access	High	Medium	Low	Medium	Low	High
Degree of Knowledge Retention	Medium	High	High	n/a	n/a	n/a
Likelihood of Increased Connection	n/a	n/a	n/a	High	Medium	Medium

Recommendation

To **maximize the likelihood that participants will retain information** they receive during virtual programming so that they can apply it in the future, I recommend that the Presidential Precinct incorporate pre-work activities and design tasks to increase in complexity into their program curriculum. Both alternatives are highly technologically accessible because they can be incorporated through the Presidential Precinct Network, the existing program interface, and can be accessed asynchronously. This format stands to benefit participants from under-served populations, ranking them higher in equity. Both alternatives require practitioners to be intentional in their design of program materials. While monitoring participants' engagement in increasingly complex tasks does require more practitioner involvement than pre-work, this alternative has already been highly effective as a best practice in virtual exchange settings (Lenkaitis & Loranc-Paszylk, 2019; Guth & Helm, 2012). While project-based learning is also highly effective in helping learners retain information, the challenges posed by a virtual, asynchronous exchange make it unlikely that this alternative could be implemented in a way that would be beneficial for all learners. It would also require consistent practitioner involvement which ranks low in organizational feasibility.

To **increase connections among participants** so they have a more robust social network with whom to collaborate and learn, I recommend that the Presidential Precinct incorporate “get-to-know-you” activities and create cohort-exclusive discussion boards within the Presidential Precinct Network. While “get-to-know-you” activities may require some creative implementation to adjust to an asynchronous format, they stand to increase positive associations within the program cohort and solidify a community by moving conversations past the superficial and into values and ideas. Discussion boards, while highly accessible, may require some practitioner involvement to ensure that conversation is interactive and not passive. The exclusivity of the discussion boards, which could serve as the platform for the “get-to-know-you” activities, incorporate the best practices of educational pedagogy and social media engagement to capture and retain participant involvement. While peer mentoring is an effective tool to improve communication skills and connections, the anticipated asynchronous format of programming for 2021 would make this alternative difficult to implement effectively. Even still, it is something to consider in future years during in-person programming or when access to communication devices is more reliable.

Implementation

Implementation of these recommended alternatives for the summer 2021 cohort of Mandela Washington Fellows, as well as for future exchanges, will require the Presidential Precinct to collaborate among the U.S. Department of State, the exchange administrator, and the participants themselves to mitigate access to technology issues. Next, the Presidential Precinct will need to re-visit the program curriculum and virtual platform to maximize their potential to foster engagement. Finally, the Presidential Precinct should work to establish clear lines of communication with participants to ensure program goals are being met and manage expectations. With clear communication and thoughtful planning, virtual exchanges can be effective in meeting their stated goals of equipping participants with the skills and social networks needed to enact positive change in their communities.

Coordinating and Mitigating Access to Technology Issues

One of the most critical elements of success of the summer 2021 projected virtual and asynchronous exchange will be managing access to technology. The State Department will need to ensure distribution of internet hotspots and technology like a laptop or tablet. Should distribution of materials not be possible, the State Department could provide a technology stipend to grantees to procure and obtain their own laptop or internet hotspot, similar to a technology stipend provided to recipients of the U.S. Agency for International Development's Higher Education Scholarship Program (*Higher Education Scholarship Program (HES)*, 2019, p.12). This is virtual exchange best practice to increase the chance of equitable access to course materials as identified by the Stevens Initiative, a State Department-funded virtual exchange advocate (H. Lewis, personal communication, Oct. 23, 2020).

The Presidential Precinct staff will need to consult with the Fellowship's program administrator, IREX, to understand the technology and access situations of the participants assigned to the Presidential Precinct. Weeks, if not months ahead of the program's start, Presidential Precinct staff (or IREX, as appropriate) should clearly communicate the technology requirements of the exchange and opportunities for accommodation, such as mobile phone access. Presidential Precinct staff should also be aware of any technology IREX will employ in the fellowship-wide summit. Fellows might not have a clear understanding of program responsibility delineation between the IREX-run fellowship-wide summit and the Presidential Precinct-run professional exchange, so staff should create materials that provide contact information for general technology-related issues. Further, staff should create a text guide to technology, including troubleshooting, what to do and who to contact if access goes down, as well as detailed written explanation of how to navigate the Presidential Precinct Network. While much of this could be done in-person verbally or through live demonstrations in the past, these instructions should be written and easily accessible without any downloads required. For reference, the State Department's Virtual Exchange Toolkit includes a technical troubleshooting cheat sheet for computer, internet, and audio issues, and this that could be built upon to provide a written troubleshooting guide for the Presidential Precinct Network (2019, p. 6-7).

Implementation of Recommended Changes to the Course Modules and Network Interface

To implement the recommended skill-building and knowledge retention alternatives of pre-work and tasks that build in complexity, Presidential Precinct staff should review the existing

curriculum and determine which modules could include pre-work or increased steps of engagement. Sessions that have already been identified in the Presidential Precinct's 2019 Exchange Program Report as needing more relevance or context for participants might be helpful ones to build in pre-work, like the sessions on cultural assets and heritage or electoral districts (2019 Institute Partner Final Program Report, 2019). To do this, staff could brainstorm a task pyramid, moving from the least involvement to the most involvement required per module and assign tasks therein, from having participants begin by reading an article and finish by applying a key takeaway from an article to their lived experience in a journal entry they write in a discussion board (Appendix A). Ideally, staff would also research different learning styles, like visual, audio, and kinesthetic learners, and incorporate different learning styles into the projected tasks (Bragg et al., 2021). The activities would then need to be added to the Presidential Precinct's exchange program modules, requiring participants to submit each before they can access the next task. This would ensure that participants build upon their engagement with subject material, increase their likelihood of retaining information, and thus help their chances of applying what they have learned in their home communities.

Once the exchange is live, the Presidential Precinct staff could assign fellows to "accountability groups". This would not only assist with relationship-building, but it would also give participants a chance to troubleshoot, ask one another questions, and reflect upon an activity. This is a practice utilized by the Young Leaders of the Americas Initiative, and it would reduce the administrative load required from Presidential Precinct staff to monitor completion of each activity (J. Fox, personal communication, Mar. 4, 2021).

To ensure the likelihood of increased connection among participants, Presidential Precinct staff should first prepare the Presidential Precinct Network for increased engagement. In addition to the existing cohorts for specific programming, like Virtual Cafés, new cohorts should be created for specific exchange program participants. Staff should also spend time before the exchange to create a bank of engaging "get-to-know-you" activities and general program-related questions or insights to help foster group engagement and learning (Appendix B). Once the fellowship begins, Presidential Precinct staff should communicate norms and expectations for cross-cultural communication and open a discussion for participants to propose their own norms for the group. This tactic is widely used by exchange practitioners, and it will help garner buy-in and participation from the fellows (*Virtual Exchange Impact and Learning Report*, 2019; *Monitoring and Evaluating of Virtual Exchange: Lessons from Literature & Implications for ECA*, 2020; Neuhaus & Rauh-Bieri, 2019). It is critical to set this baseline before discussion begins, especially since almost all the inter-cohort discussion will occur on the platform and it might be some participants' first time communicating across cultures.

Managing Expectations and Facilitating Feedback

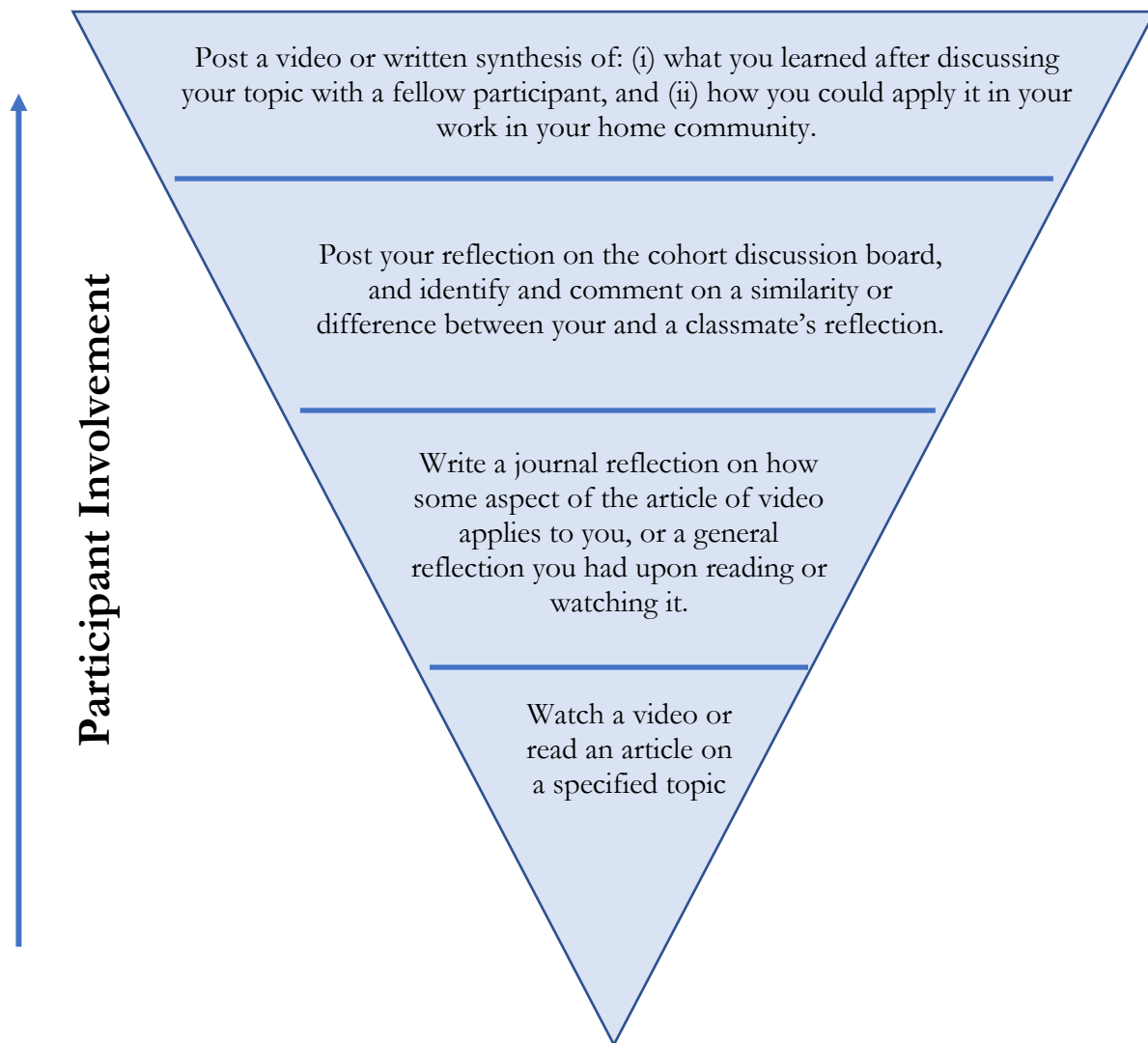
Finally, Presidential Precinct staff should be mindful, and try to mitigate fellows' expectations and potential challenges, with the virtual and asynchronous exchange. The 2021 cohort of Mandela Washington Fellows, for example, has already had their exchange postponed a year, and the opportunity to which they applied for a six-week residency in the United States is still not possible. They may be disappointed or have different expectations than what a virtual asynchronous fellowship can provide (*Monitoring and Evaluating of Virtual Exchange: Lessons from Literature & Implications for ECA*, 2020). Further, many fellows may have undergone or are still dealing with increased stress or trauma from the pandemic. Because of this, the exchange should be tailored to the participants, "rather than attempting to tailor the participants to the technology" (*Virtual Exchange Toolkit*, 2019). To make sure participants can make the most of their exchange, the

Presidential Precinct should clearly post the exchange program's goals for participants to reference often. This will give participants clear deliverables, help to set expectations, and give participants agency to check in with program staff if their learning needs are not being met. While asynchronous materials can be seen as unengaging by participants, staff can mitigate this in the program design by including connection points like discussion posts, task submission, and periodic check-ins to garner participant feedback (Patterson, et al. 2012; *Virtual Exchange Impact and Learning Report*, 2019). Staff should also anticipate and build in flexibility and understand that the asynchronous format means that participants might work through materials at a very different pace. To keep up engagement, staff could provide “further learning” activities like journal prompts, suggested articles, podcasts, or other activities to those who work through material faster than others.

With intentional program design, clear communication, and a healthy dose of flexibility, the Presidential Precinct staff can foster a unique and rewarding professional virtual exchange while the global pandemic makes international travel unsafe. The recommended alternatives are designed to be flexible to participants' technological capabilities and can be adapted as technological needs change- if synchronous or in-person experiences become an option, most alternatives can be modified to fit the given format. The format notwithstanding, these alternatives pull from the best practices of exchange programs, educational pedagogy, social network analysis and social media engagement to maximize skill-building and relationship-building for a successful exchange.

Appendix A

Example of a Task Pyramid for Curriculum Design



Examples of learning techniques from Dunlosky et al., 2013

Appendix B

“Get-To-Know-You” Discussion Questions and/or Deeper Discussion Prompts

- How would you describe your future in three words and why?
- What are your hopes and fears for this exchange?
- Take a picture of the view from your “desk” and share it on the discussion board. What are some similarities and differences with others’ locations?
- What was a childhood dream of yours and how does it relate (or not) to your current aspirations?
- What is something you have achieved in the past year, no matter how small?
- “Describe yourself in a tweet”: have participants write a short (less than 140 character) bio. Then have a discussion about what they chose to include or not include and why.
- What are words that come to mind when you think of (insert topic) and why? Ex. Civic engagement, democracy.
- In one-two sentences, what do you think were the most important points covered in the course today/this week?
- Have participants take turns providing a discussion question for the cohort for a “question of the day”.
- Create a pre-program survey to ask participants questions about themselves, and each day highlight a different fellow. This will help participants feel like they are all one cohort and learn more about each other when they will not be able to converse as easily online.
- Have participants “pin” their location onto a collaborative map of the world, as well as key pins for the Presidential Precinct (Monticello, College of William and Mary, Washington D.C., etc.)

Compiled from: *Specific Activities That Promote Online Discussion*, n.d.; Symonds, 2021

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