



Virtual Fairs & Outreach: What We Have Learned So Far

The beginning of the fall semester has been a whirlwind of Zoom meetings connecting with your students. Over the last several weeks, we have uncovered quite a few lessons learned that we thought might be helpful to share. Education Abroad is a collaborative community and we hope this information, gathered from over a hundred virtual events, will help each of us to become more effective in the planning and promotion of virtual outreach and engagement, especially for those with events scheduled later this semester or next spring.

QUALITY VS. QUANTITY

As we've quickly come to learn, virtual fairs are very different than on-campus and in-person events. The virtual space draws students who are already interested and engaged in the potential of study abroad. This is different from the traditional on-campus events that would attract vast numbers of students walking through the union. For this, we have noticed better outcomes with quality over quantity. The conversations, while fewer, are more targeted, specific and immediate. We believe that as upcoming decision deadlines draw near, we will see more engagement with students.

PLATFORMS

Reflecting on the most important elements of a virtual fair, the selection of which platform to use appeared least influential in successful virtual student engagement. With the right marketing, planning, structure and campus-engagement, almost any platform can work. We suggest checking around campus to see what platform other departments or offices, such as Career Services, use to determine if that platform could work for your event. The more familiar your students are with a platform and the better you communicate about how to use it, the more potential you have for a successful event. While a familiar platform can work well, one of our partner universities was using a new platform and only started advertising the week leading up to the event. By reaching out to multiple partners on campus, like academic advisors, faculty, and career centers, putting information up on social media, and targeting student publications to spread the word, they were able to get hundreds of student registrations for the event. If your campus does not already use a virtual event platform, we have found a few that work well. Here are some additional insights regarding some of the more commonly utilized platforms.

ZOOM

Zoom is not technically a virtual event platform, nor do we recommend using only Zoom as your virtual event platform. However, it is the preferred program for virtual meetings, walk-in advising and information sessions. Zoom is relatively easy to use and most are familiar with its functionality. When providers or faculty-leaders create their own Zoom links with custom registration, capturing student information and interest is easy and effective. Asking presenters to create their own Zoom link, which is preferred by most, also requires less preparation and coordination for the education abroad office .

LUNAFAIRS

[Luna Fairs](#) is an education-abroad-designed platform that combines universities, students and overseas program partners. Like Terra Dotta Directory, providers build their own pages, which are embedded with resources and can link to a private Zoom room. To set up the fair, institutions add the providers and programs they would like to be listed, including faculty-led options and exchanges if offered. While one fair date may be advertised with a singular opportunity to meet with provider reps, the Luna Fair site is open for the entirety of the semester and could be used again for another promotional event later in the term or for students to review at their leisure throughout the semester. Note that the pre-planned dates providers will be available for walk-in advising should be included in the marketing and outreach of the event. Luna Fairs is most successful when the fair registration link is sent to all students on campus through a variety of methods (social media, direct email, website presence, etc.). This is a good platform to attract both prospective and interested students. Student interest is captured through the fair registration, which is shared when a match is made between the student's interest and the



provider. Students also have the option to favorite a provider, however it appears the few use this function. Of all platforms we have experienced thus far, LunaFairs has proven to be the most successful in capturing interested student's information.

HANDSHAKE

[Handshake](#) is a virtual event platform typically used by Career Services to match students with potential employers. Many have been successful adapting the platform for education abroad. Similar to Luna fairs, partners build out individual pages and profiles. Partners may schedule a series of information sessions on the day of the event with individual advising in between. All scheduling is done through Handshake. Student advising sessions are limited to 10 minutes. The 10 minute advising sessions are short enough that many students sign up for this feature. Most of the institutions that used Handshake did so with their Career Services Internships Fair. This collaboration expanded promotional reach and increased enrollment. Capturing student information from Handshake is limited to students who participate in either the information sessions or 1:1 advising, however the student information is partner specific.

HOME-MADE PLATFORMS

A few education abroad offices and regional groups have designed home-made platforms, such as a self-enrolled Canvas course or Microsoft Teams/SharePoint site. The success of these events largely depends on the structure and the marketing. Both platforms allow students to access fair resources throughout the semester while advertising one (or more) virtual fair day(s). Anything homemade can be more time intensive than anticipated and requires at least one person in your office to be technologically savvy. Self-enrolled courses have been effective to distribute information, but Microsoft Teams and SharePoint for communication has had mixed success. The video meeting, chat, or newsfeed function of Microsoft Teams is quite limiting in this use. Capturing interested student information for homemade platforms is limited to registration, which may be shared with participating partners.

MARKETING

No matter what platform is chosen, marketing and promotion is the single most important component of a virtual fair. All of the successful events had a well-mapped out marketing strategy that began at least a week prior to the event and included various methods of promotion. Those who were less successful failed to promote the event properly.

EMAIL

Email is the most effective form of marketing- especially if using campus-wide or departmental listservs. Most successful events included email marketing weeks prior to the event. If you have access to a listserv for academic advisors or other advisors on campus, sharing out a link to the event with details on the date(s) and time(s) to promote to their students is a great strategy. For student emailing, one institution pulled all students in their Terra Dotta system and sent them an email with the fair registration link. Another institution sent out a campus-wide email to freshmen, sophomore and juniors a few days before the event, which drew the highest number of registrations compared to other promotions. All registrants should receive a reminder email the day of the fair (ideally 1-2 hours before) with a few technology tips. Post-fair emails move students through their next steps and should encourage scheduling 1:1 advising.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Early and frequent social media is the key to many virtual event's success. Use all the available engagement within Instagram including stories, live Q&A, timeline posts, and student-driven content. Engage peer advisors, social media interns, and study abroad ambassadors to create content to share on their accounts and ask them to tag your office to share on the official accounts. Tag other offices or departments on any promotional material you would like for them to share on their account. One office held a Passport raffle on their social media to incentivize fair registration which drew a lot of engagement. Remember to use hashtags. Hashtags make content easier to find especially if you incorporate hashtags that are used in other areas across campus to engage students. If your institution has an IG account with over 10k followers, post and use the swipe up feature to link to the registration.



IG TAKEOVERS AND IG LIVE

Instagram takeovers by students and partners is good for promotion and awareness. Lead generation and engagement can be low during an Instagram takeover; however the reach is strong and helps bring more awareness to your page, your office, and your events. IG analytics provide real-time data. When plugging sign-ups or registrations, be sure to include the link in the bio and direct students there.

CROSS-PROMOTION

Wide reach is key. Build partnerships on campus for cross-promotion and to diversify student demographics. Share email templates and social media graphics with the fair details. Potential promotional partners include: all Colleges and departments, academic advisors, freshmen seminar courses, the multicultural center, office of service-learning, office of undergraduate research, Honors and Greek Life. To encourage attendance, consider requesting colleges or departments to make attendance a requirement or for extra credit. And don't forget freshmen seminars! Share promotional graphics, pre-recorded presentations and other resources with freshmen seminar instructors. If your institution has an IG account with over 10k followers, post and use the swipe up feature to link to the registration.

PLANNING & STRUCTURE

DURATION

It might seem counterintuitive, but longer fairs tend to have lower participation and registration. A one or two-week packed schedule is hard to digest, and many students struggle to get started. Instead, consider short, more time-bound interactions with partners. Host information sessions or presentations that are 30 minutes or less and have more specific titles. Remember to unpack the alphabet soup of providers in your session titles by focusing more on the why than the what. Short and scheduled 1:1 advising with providers is also better than long, "walk-in" virtual advising sessions. Students can plan better when they know exactly what time they can talk to someone and how it aligns with their schedule. Keep any "walk-in" feature limited to 1-2 hours rather than open-ended availability

AGENDA

Overbooked and double-booked schedules confuse and overwhelm students. Keep it simple. Study abroad fair days are better than weeks. Agendas that include College or Departmental engagement help to focus student's participation. Students are more willing to commit if the events are focused, short, and time-bound because they know what to expect. Registration and/or booking in advance increases participation. At larger institutions, student engagement is higher when the day is structured by academic area of study instead by partner. As well, this requires providers to highlight programs that align better with the academic area, which helps students narrow their options easier. And always remember to unpack the alphabet soup of providers in your session titles by focusing more on the why than the what.

TIMING

Virtual events held between 10-2pm and 4-5pm have had the most participation. Early September events had low attendance; however late September has increased significantly. This may be due to the proximity of approaching deadlines or the additional time dedicated to planning and promoting.

CAMPUS-WIDE & DEPARTMENTAL COLLABORATION

Engage and collaborate with key colleges and departments in the creation and format of the fair. Academic-specific information sessions draw good participation. A few institutions designed a fair that included a series of college-levels fair days. They all had great attendance because it got the departmental buy-in, focused student participation and included targeted marketing. Train each college or department how to host their own virtual rooms and ask them to disseminate fair promotion.



STUDENT ADVISING

Scheduled 1:1 advising is better than walk-in advising. Commitment leads to greater participation. It also gives students the ability to plan and know they will receive tailored advice and attention. Isolate a specific time and date to promote scheduled 1:1 advising rather than distributing an open scheduling. For no-show fair registrants, encourage booking an advising appointment. Consider linking your office and a few partners scheduling links in the signature of your email.

INFORMATION SESSIONS

Whether hosted by themselves or as a feature of the fair, information sessions are very effective to provide tailored information to a group of students.

PROMOTION

Share a weekly snapshot of available information sessions through your listserv. One institution has been very successful sending out info session registrations via the campus listserv. If your office isn't offering information sessions, use your partner's information sessions to generate more interest and awareness.

SPECIFIC VS. GENERAL

Specific information sessions have the highest participation. Students are drawn to information that is tailored to them. One institution designed the entire fair as a series of targeted academic information sessions. While the content generation took a lot of time, the results were well worth it. Think about offering sessions that focus more on financial aid and scholarships, on how going abroad might look different in 2021 and beyond, or on myths of studying abroad. To provide the student perspective, host alumni panels where students can ask questions directly to past participants.

RECORDING

Many education abroad offices have used recorded information sessions as a feature of their virtual fair. One institution posted a Zoom information session to Facebook Live and while the live participation was low, over 150 students watched the Facebook Live recording. Record all information sessions and distribute to interested students or post on social media. This content can be shared after the event to help enhance your outreach to different audiences.

REGISTRATION

Registration is the best way to capture new student interest. Registration also pushes students to commit to a time and event, which increases the likelihood that they will show up. However, keep the registration simple with a 1-step process. The good news is that even if they are a no-show, you still have their information to engage with them later. Use registration information to send reminder and thank you emails. You can also use this list as a start for sending some of the recordings you captured. There are lots of opportunities that still exist even if they don't show up to the original event or session!

Summary

We hope this information is helpful. If you have more lessons learned or examples of success that we've missed, please share! We will continue to lift up examples of success as much as possible. Our team of Regional Directors, who are now experienced in virtual outreach and events, are available as a resource to you. We welcome the opportunity to brainstorm, share and collaborate with you and your office!