

TECHNOLOGY CONSULTING

IN THE GLOBAL COMMUNITY

Cultural Exchange Program

Final Report

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TCinGC 2020 Cultural Exchange Program

facilitated by Angie Jolicoeur, Rachael Johnson, and Deborah Blank



What was the Cultural Exchange Program?

- TCinGC is an internship program which connects CMU students to communities all around the world in order to provide technical assistance and develop useful databases, software, and other materials. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, international travel was impossible, yet the internships were able to be held in a remote capacity, ensuring that students could still receive the work experience and contribute their skills to important projects. Therefore, the CMU interns prepared to begin working with the Ministry of Education and the Bureau of Tourism in Palau. However, a crucial component of TCinGC is the opportunity to travel to another country and be immersed in the experience of living and working there. To fill this gap, the TCinGC team reached out to Stephan Caspar and Sébastien Dubreil, experienced educators who specialize in utilizing technology to facilitate cultural exchange. They proposed a series of Zoom meetings in which the CMU student interns and the Palauan employees could discuss various cultural topics, providing an informal opportunity for everyone to learn and connect over personal experiences, much like they would have done in person.

Why was cultural exchange an important complement to the consulting experience?

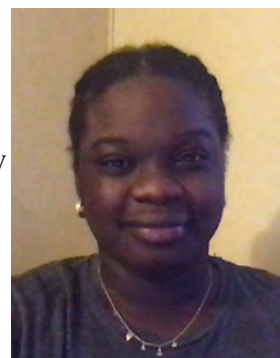
- Cultural exchange is an essential component of the TCinGC program. By living abroad, students gain a first-hand knowledge of the community that they are assisting, interact both in and out of the office with the employees, and gain a greater knowledge of other cultures and the impact of the work that they are doing. Providing a space for this exchange, even in a remote capacity, was vital to preserving the ethos of the TCinGC program. By setting aside a dedicated time and format for conversations about memories,

traditions, and customs, students and Palauan employees formed a closer connection, and the goals of cultural exchange were met in the best way possible.

Who are we?

- To plan and facilitate the Zoom meetings, Stephan and Sébastien reached out to us: three students whom they previously knew and who had experience with cultural exchange. We gladly accepted the opportunity to assist TCinGC with fulfilling their important goal of maintaining the cultural component of the internship, and we ourselves had fun and learned so much by participating in these meetings.

- **Angie Jolicoeur:** I am starting my fourth year at Carnegie Mellon transferring to a major in Statistics and Machine Learning with a possible additional major in French and Francophone Studies. I was born in New York but mostly grew up in Haiti, my parents' home country. I have been moving around between Haiti, New York, and Canada since the age of 11. Being a native French speaker, adapting to a new environment and a foreign language in middle school was an incredible experience that led to my curiosity about different societies. I consider myself a world citizen with the goal of visiting and immersing myself in as many cultures as I can. I was excited about the opportunity to do this cultural exchange program especially with Palau as the Palauan flag is one of my favorites. This experience once again proved to me that one can always find commonalities with people half-way across the world and that the differences between us serve to enrich the world we live in.



- **Rachael Johnson:** I am a rising senior at CMU with majors in Global Studies and French and Francophone Studies. Additionally, I am beginning a master's degree in Arts Management at CMU's Heinz College. I am from Tennessee, went to boarding school in New Hampshire, studied abroad in France during my senior year of high school, along with other travel experiences. My most impactful and educational experiences have been those in which I have interacted with people from different cultures and with different perspectives and experiences. Working with TCinGC this summer has shown me that my passion for cultural diversity and intercultural communication can be translated into work with a concrete impact, and I truly enjoyed and learned so much from our meetings.



- **Deborah Blank:** I am entering my fourth and final year of study at CMU as a Mathematical Sciences major (concentrating in Operations Research and Statistics) and a Business Administration minor. After spending the duration of my childhood in Wisconsin, my family moved to Australia nearly two years ago. Experiencing the differences and similarities between the United States and Australia has highlighted the importance of cultural understanding to me. Both of these countries have a unique perspective on the world and approach life with different mindsets. Working on this project has enriched my understanding of how history and geography shape culture, and how culture shapes the community.



What are the best practices for the planning of a cultural program?

- In our experience this summer, there were central elements of planning which worked particularly well or could be improved further in order to facilitate the most comfortable and educational remote cultural experience.
 - **Order of Topics:** Considering the summer and our schedule of topics as a whole, we realize that the order of topics was crucial to creating the best conversational flow, building genuine connections, and promoting a comfortable meeting environment. We of course began with introductions in our first meeting, and for later meetings, we developed the schedule of topics from a preliminary schedule built by Stephan, Sébastien, and the TCinGC team. We recognized that the topics of earlier meetings should encapsulate the broadest experiences. Topics like childhood and food are international experiences which are likely to spark interesting stories, allowing participants to find shared experiences and break down the generalizations others may have of their community or culture. In later weeks, we moved into topics which prompted more specific stories from individual participants, and participants were more comfortable individually sharing because they had participated in an earlier communal process. Because of this gradual transition, the meetings felt like conversations between a group of people with shared interests rather than a lecture or classroom environment.
 - **Coordination with TCinGC Partners and Participants:** Because of the sudden change to a remote experience, the cultural exchange program had to be planned fairly quickly. Our appreciation for the commitment of the Palauan employees to sharing their experiences cannot be expressed enough: their willingness to tell stories, plan demonstrations, share photos, and be present for our meetings was incredible, and this program could literally not have been done without them.

Given the timeframe in which the program had to be developed, the meetings went extremely well, yet we realized some practices which would be useful for future programs with more time to plan.

First, establishing a clear schedule of topics as early as possible is essential for guiding the program and allowing time to prepare for more involved activities. For example, we would have liked to exchange a “box of things”: CMU participants would collect items to be sent to Palau and Palau employees would collect items to send to the United States, and the boxes would be opened during one of the meetings. However, given shipping times, this activity would require a great deal of advanced planning and coordination.

Second, having resources and additional information available would be useful. We created various materials, such as brochures and powerpoints, but an expanded variety of reference materials would prepare participants well for the meetings.

Third, building in more structured time and activities for reflection, particularly for the CMU students, would have prompted a greater level of engagement and a greater long-term impact. Additionally, conversations, journaling, or other forums for reflection would likely result in more feedback about the meetings and the program, allowing the team to better tailor the meetings to the interests and the goals of the participants.

Fourth, if the program were to be developed further, a dedicated cultural partner from Palau would have been extremely useful. Participating in and contributing to the cultural exchange meetings required a great deal of time and effort from the Palauan employees, so having a dedicated specialist to work with them would have alleviated the strain on their time and allowed for better communication between the CMU and Palauan teams.

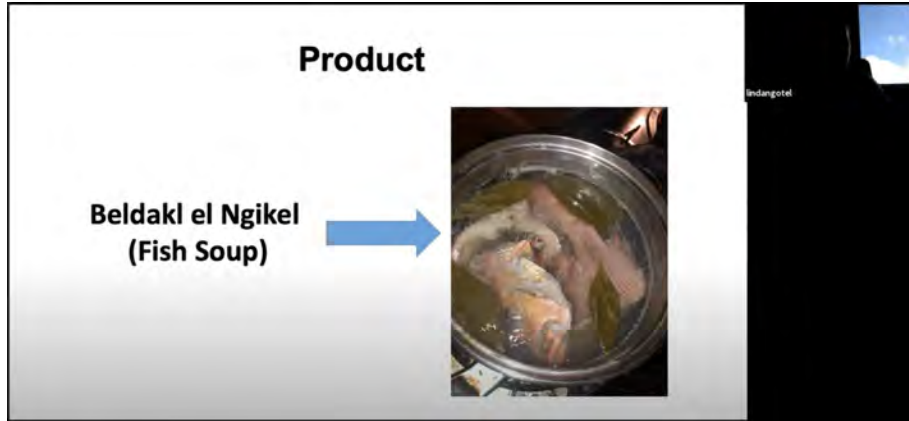
What are the best practices for the planning and facilitation of weekly meetings?

- In addition to the best practices for the program as a whole, there were certain practices which lead to the best results in planning weekly meetings.
 - **Pre-Meeting Engagement:** For certain meetings, participants submitted photos or other media beforehand. For example, participants submitted photos of their favorite foods for Week 3, and they submitted photos of their favorite books and movies for Week 6. Participants would then individually share their memories and experiences and answer others’ questions, which led to the most engaging and interesting meetings of the program. We believe that is because participants had to think about their contributions before the meetings, so they contributed more thoughtfully; because everyone participated, meaning that more reticent participants would contribute; and because a wide variety of questions would be asked by other participants, sparking authentic conversations.

- **Natural Flow of Conversation:** While we had an outline for our activities and discussions at each meeting, we realized that it was important to recognize when to allow the conversation to flow naturally, even if it deviated from that meeting's topic. We often had our most interesting conversations from a participant asking another a question and sparking a discussion of current events, memories, or traditions. As facilitators, we had to recognize when that happened, encourage these conversations, and recognize when it was appropriate to bring up the next topic that we had planned.

What were the topics explored during the Cultural Program?

- **Week 1 - Getting to Know You:** This meeting was the first of the program, and so we began with personal introductions and introductory information.
- **Week 2 - Childhood Learning and Social Studies:** In this meeting, we discussed the Palauan educational system and memories of our families, our childhoods, and our education.
- **Week 3 - Food:** This meeting began with a discussion of our favorite foods before we watched a presentation about how to prepare beldakl, or Palauan fish soup.
- **Week 4 - Sports and Games:** We discussed Palau's participation in the Olympics and the Pacific Games, the popularity of baseball in Palau, and were shown how to play a Palauan bean bag game.
- **Week 5 - Music:** We started this meeting by listening to the Palauan national anthem. Each participant then shared their favorite musical artists and genres, and the musical instruments that they played. Delina and Jay from Palau also sang for us.
- **Week 6 - Literature and Movies:** Before this meeting, participants submitted photos of their favorite books and movies. During the meeting, each participant shared a summary of their favorites and their memories of reading or watching it.
- **Week 7 - Things:** For this week, participants were asked to collect three items: one item that was blue or yellow, one item that reminded them of their family, and one mystery item.
- **Week 8 - 3D Images:** Early in the summer, Stephan had sent a 360° camera to Palau, and during this meeting, the images collected with that camera were shown.
- **Week 9 - Wrap-up/Saying "See You Later":** During our final meeting, we had an excellent discussion in response to some additional participant questions about Palau. We also discussed our favorite memories from the program and then said "see you soon!"



Week 3 - Beldakl Presentation



Week 4 - Palauan Bean Bag Game



Week 7 - Things

What feedback did we receive from participants?

- To Continue:
 - **“I like that you opened with an icebreaker - suggest that you repeat that.”**
From this, we know that the introductory activities were effective.
 - **“The recorded video will be a nice take-away to have content going forward.”** Capturing photos and videos from the meetings is a good way to capture content and preserve memories.
 - **“Everybody came to the meeting prepared, and the topics of the discussion were clear.”** This comment was in reference to a meeting in which participants submitted materials beforehand and shows that this was an effective format.
 - **“People involved are friendly and accommodating.”**
- To Improve:
 - **“Always be very clear on the timing.”** There was some scheduling confusion with the first couple of meetings, and so being clear about the schedule and sending reminders is essential.
 - **“Maybe set aside time after the next session to talk about upcoming sessions and get everyone's input.”** Setting aside time at the end of each meeting to talk about upcoming weeks is an effective way to prepare participants for future topics and receive more automatic feedback.
 - **“Games or more round-robin type activities will help.”** More interactive activities would increase participant engagement and create a fun atmosphere.
 - **“I think that asking for fewer responses will improve the quality of each submission.”** This was in reference to the photos which participants submitted before meetings. When participants are asked to contribute ahead of time, leaving the number of photos/other up to the participant is the best way to ensure that participants contribute what they care about most.
 - **“I think if we did a "live" cooking of the fish and pounded taro then it would have been a great experience to the students.”** This comment reinforces that the activities should be as interactive as possible.
 - **“Maybe we could have talked more about specific cultures each student practices at home that are similar and or different from Palau culture.”** This would be an excellent practice going forward, as it would increase the intercultural nature of the program and engage students further in the meetings.
 - **“I think it's more that we should set up a "curriculum and syllabus" for the project which we certainly did not have time to do.”** As mentioned, more time for advanced planning would allow for more involved activities and greater participant preparation and engagement.

In Conclusion:

- These Zoom meetings allowed for meaningful cultural exchange. Each participant shared personal experiences and preferences with the group, and engaged with the responses of the other group members. These interactions sparked discussions that revealed details about Palauan culture that could not have been gleaned from reading research materials alone.

Furthermore, these meetings promoted a sense of community within the group. As the weeks progressed and the topics became more specific, participants became increasingly familiar with each other. In effect, participants were able to connect facts with personal stories, and develop a multilayered understanding of culture, both on the larger scale of the country and on a personal, more intimate level.

- Similar programs in the future have the potential to be more successful than this project. Throughout the summer, the TCinGC cultural exchange team analyzed and documented actions that contributed to the success of each meeting, and collected participant feedback. These insights can inform and enrich future programs. In particular, incorporating more structure into the meetings, including more collaborative activities, and encouraging student reflection throughout the process will enhance future virtual culture programs.