

2021 Food Symposium Adapting to Pandemic Challenges: An International Collaboration

*Maria Bampasidou¹, Sarah Elizabeth Bernard², Rocio Lopez³ and
Ivana Tregenza⁴*
*Louisiana State University Agricultural Center
Baton Rouge, LA*

Miroslav Jůzl⁵, Alena Saláková⁶
*Mendel University in Brno
Zemědělská, Brno
Czech Republic*



Abstract

Higher education (HE) institutions continuously evolve to meet the needs of students, faculty, and staff to grow as global citizens. The recent pandemic put academic and research programs in stress. International partnerships and collaborations had to adapt to allow existing efforts to continue with many functions shifting to online. However, documentation of efforts and good practices, an indisputable part of the process is sparse or anecdotal. This paper presents information on the LSU – Mendel partnership and how the jointly organized virtual Food Symposium 2021 provided an opportunity for the two universities to adapt and strengthen existing collaborations during the pandemic. We discuss the programmatic efforts highlighting the importance of the strategic partnership and document interest and participation in the symposium. A total of 302 attended the symposium, of which 76% were students. The symposium brought together scientists working on food-related areas including food safety and security, food waste, food production, and nutrition. Moreover, the symposium provided cultural exchange opportunities to students and faculty alike during the pandemic. This case study serves as a reference to a successful US-Central EU HE institution partnership and demonstrates strategic decision making and adjustments undertaken during the pandemic to adapt to the 'New Normal'.

Keywords: Food, international programs, virtual

symposium, strategic partnership, multisource

Internationalization and globalization have been imprinted in higher education (HE) systems for decades. The integration of international dimensions into teaching, research, and outreach, as well as service functions of HE institutions have transitioned from individual activities to well-planned, structured, and administered processes (Teichler, 1999; 2009) which are at the core of institutional interest (Brandenburg and de Wit, 2011). HE institutions have adapted their academic and professional requirements to reflect increasing demands of the globalization of labor markets (Qiang 2003; Griffith et al., 2016; Zgaga, 2019). These efforts include enhancing technical skills, academic and scientific knowledge, improving intercultural knowledge, and developing transversal skills (Qiang, 2003; Coelho & Menezes, 2020).

Common indicators of internationalization and globalization include investments in collaborative research, outcomes of collaborative research, recruitment of international students, and faculty and student exchange programs (Bedenlier & Zawacki-Richter, 2015). The last years we note more students studying abroad (at all educational levels), increased international mobility of faculty, growth of international research collaborations, and more activities and programs supported by international programs; all these are prime examples of HE adapting to needs of students and faculty (Spring, 2009; Gopal, 2011;

¹Agricultural Economics and Agribusiness, Louisiana State University Agricultural Center, Baton Rouge, LA, 70803, US

² International Programs, Louisiana State University Agricultural Center, Baton Rouge, LA, 70803, US

³ International Programs, Louisiana State University Agricultural Center, Baton Rouge, LA, 70803, US

⁴ International Programs, Louisiana State University Agricultural Center, Baton Rouge, LA, 70803, US

⁵Faculty of AgriSciences, Department of Food Technology, Mendel University in Brno, Zemědělská 1/1665, 613 00 Brno, Czech Republic

⁶Faculty of AgriSciences, Department of Food Technology, Mendel University in Brno, Zemědělská 1/1665, 613 00 Brno, Czech Republic

Author Note: Correspondence regarding this article should be addressed to Maria Bampasidou, 234 Martin D. Woodin Hall, Agricultural Economics and Agribusiness Department, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, LA 70803, US. Email: Mbampasidou@agcenter.lsu.edu

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Griffith et al., 2016). Studies report on benefits of international program collaborations ranging from increased scientific output (higher impact rates, publications, citations, patents), increased interconnectedness of scientists (Jeong, Choi & Kim, 2014), to student development (Carlson et al., 1992; Kehl & Morris, 2008; Gaia, 2015).

International programs are instrumental in meeting the continuously changing agenda of HE institutions forming collaborations to provide international opportunities to students and faculty, and enhance their curricula (Altbach and Knight, 2007). However, international programs face challenges in organizing, promoting, and supporting international collaborations with only strategic partnerships persevering. Reasons include reduced funding, increased costs of travel, and time constraints from faculty and students as well as lack of planning skills from students and international inexperience. The recent pandemic added extra stress to international collaborations between HE institutions with many programs putting existing efforts on hold or exploring alternative means (remote, online, distance learning, etc.).

The international programs of Louisiana State University Agricultural Center hereafter referred to as LSU AgCenter Global Network and their Central EU counterpart Mendel University in Brno, Czech Republic (hereafter MENDELU) have formed a partnership engaging students and faculty to collaborate in education, research, extension, and outreach activities. Programmatic efforts for 2020 included the launching of the Food Symposium; an in-person meeting bringing together experts from respective disciplines highlighting existing collaborations and setting the pace for future ones. The pandemic challenged the implementation of the symposium moving to a virtual format. The organizers of the symposium capitalized on existing synergies, without compromising the quality of the meetings, offering students and faculty the opportunity to interact with peers. For some, this was the first exposure to an 'international collaboration' experience from home. This case study presents information on the partnership and the outcomes of the Food Symposium serving as a reference to a successful US-Central EU HE institution partnership while demonstrating strategic decision making and adjustments undertaken during the pandemic.

Partnership Description & Food Symposium

The LSU AgCenter – MENDELU strategic partnership started in 2014. In this partnership, LSU is represented by the Agricultural Center, providing access to engagements in extension and outreach, as well as entrepreneurship and technology transfer, and the College of Agriculture (CoA) providing academic education and opportunities to students. MENDELU, Czech Republic, is a public institution with a long tradition of excellence in teaching and research that has driven new ways of thinking since 1919. Both institutions have a strong interest in international relations.

The first contact took place after an email campaign to sixteen universities of agriculture in Central Europe. The international office at MENDELU Faculty of Horticulture initiated a positive response within 24 hour and was eager

to cooperate. Therefore, the first visit of LSU AgCenter five-member team representing various areas of potential engagement set to travel and meet with this team. The efforts quickly shifted from cooperation between international relations offices to fostering collaboration between the horticulture departments to proposing student and faculty exchanges, cooperation at the administrative level and finally to a strategic and comprehensive partnership with a future outlook. As such, the two counterparts explored opportunities in student development providing opportunities at all levels of studies, faculty linkages for research and teaching, collaborative projects, industry liaisons, and technology transfer. Within a few years, over 150 direct linkages and synergies between both partners were established. These range from academic program offerings providing valuable practical opportunities, to cooperation of staff members from both partners in areas of administration, communication and IT collaboration.

For LSU AgCenter, creating a strategic partnership with a selected university was a part of the institution's international strategy to focus resources and activities by creating complex international programs in Central and Eastern Europe. For MENDELU, the strategic partnership offered an opportunity for strengthening internalization, global attractiveness, and competitiveness of Czech higher education. The Monitoring Internationalization of Czech Higher Education (MICHE) report (ACA, 2021) mentioned lack of internationalization opportunities for home students and potential for developing in-home international engagement for Czech institutions. A long-term strategic partnership between the two universities allows both institutions to learn about each other's strengths, establish trust, and uncover deeper synergies in research, teaching, and extension/outreach functions.

Food Symposium

The idea of a jointly organized Food Symposium was born in 2018 with the intent to further existing interest and synergies, widen the cooperation between scientists of food related disciplines, and explore academic program opportunities. Changes brought by the world pandemic, such as stay-at-home orders, social distancing, and travel restrictions did not allow for in-person meetings. However, the pandemic brought to the forefront (worldwide, regional, and local) disruptions at all segments of the supply chain. The plethora of news on effects of the pandemic in food supply and processing, updated guidelines related to food handling and food safety, and the need for answers created an urge to accelerate discussion on regional food supply. Topics of particular interest included producer needs and supply requirements (e.g., food safety), consumer-demand (e.g., food availability, food access, nutritional value), and disruptions in food processing (e.g., food safety, food handling, workers' health, processing times and capacity). Due to the urgency and timeliness, the topic of "Importance of Regional Food Supply During Covid-19" was selected for the inaugural year.

LSU AgCenter's Global Network had a leading role in preparation of this Food Symposium, providing

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logistical and organizational support along with the IT and Communications departments. MENDELU was led by its Faculty of AgriSciences (the equivalent of a Department of AgriSciences) with much support provided by the International Office and representatives of other departments. Utilization of online platforms (Microsoft Teams, in this case) enabled this event to be hosted on a larger than expected scale. Organizers considered time-zone differences as well as the change to springtime (US precedes Czech Republic) to accommodate presenters and attendees from both institutions. A two-week window in March was selected with symposium activities taking place in the morning hours for LSU and afternoon hours for MENDELU.

The topics of the LSU-MENDELU Symposium 2021 crossed multiple agricultural and related disciplines and various departments were represented from both universities.¹ Presentations covered existing and ongoing research, applications of research in education, extension and outreach programs, and collaborations of the two institutions with local and regional food industries. Both universities actively pursue trends in food production (examples include dairy and meat products) and provide support to the local food industry through trainings, testing, and product development. Moreover, the sessions underlined the importance of food to the unique geography and culture of each country.

Food Security, Food Technology and Production, Food Safety, and Nutrition were key topics covered in the symposium, recognizing their importance to food systems on local, regional, and global scales. The beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic uncovered critical points in food systems and food supply chains as well as clearly identified the need for a regional focus when it comes to food systems and food related knowledge (Thilmany et al., 2020). The synergies of these topics allowed for the inclusion of related fields such as food waste economics, horticulture, and food entrepreneurship, covering a larger spectrum and emerging areas of the food supply chain. The symposium offered a platform to present examples of food system disruptions attributed and deepened through COVID, from the participating states and countries. Disparities in food availability, quality and access are persistent problems in cities across the United States (O'Hara & Toussaint, 2021), and in the Czech Republic (Prášilová et al., 2015; Pulkrábek, et al., 2019). Lack of access to nutritionally high value foods, a common phenomenon in food desert areas and in communities with socially excluded groups in both countries, was exacerbated during the pandemic.

The Food Symposium took place over five workdays, each day featuring a three-hours research session. It consisted of 12 hours of presentations with 26 different topics, a 1.5-hour educational session, a one hour of student interactive session, and one hour of discussion. The program was structured into session topics as showcased in Table 1.

The educational session was a new initiative of a

joint online course, 'Comparative Analysis of Regional Food Systems', led by a LSU CoA Agricultural Economics professor jointly with faculty from the MENDELU Faculty of Regional Development. The session was open to all symposium participants. The interactive round table discussion, which was led by student moderators, was used to showcase university campuses, traditions, cities, and cuisine. Videos created by the students were used to display the differences between campuses and students' life. The interactive portion consisted of questions from the panelists and attendees. The goal of this session was to integrate cultural aspects of student life so students can connect with their peers, exchange information on student activities and academic programs. Moreover, the session was meant to generate interest from both sides for future collaborations/projects involving students, such as semester abroad opportunities, joint research projects, short term study-abroad programs, and visiting scholar programs.

Purpose and Methods

For the first symposium initiated by this partnership, the purpose was to identify key thematic topics for collaboration, evaluate programmatic needs, document outcomes, and identify areas of improvement. The planning committee would then evaluate the respective information and use it as a guide for organizing and planning the Food Symposium 2.0. We collected data from registration, logins from participants and chats during presentations, and comments from post-conference discussions. In addition, we documented projects initiated by faculty of the two institutions, student interest in participating in study abroad programs and research activities, among other symposium outcomes. The registration survey and proposed analysis of data collected throughout the symposium was reviewed and approved by the institutions Institutional Review Board (IRBAG-22-0031). For this manuscript we focus on presenting information on participant interest, topics of interest, and symposium outcomes.

We used Qualtrics for the registration and we promoted the symposium through email to the respective departments and faculties, CoA and international programs. The registration site was available for 10 weeks before the starting date of the symposium. Reminder emails were sent periodically from international offices at both universities with weekly reminders the month preceding the symposium. Additionally, existing newsletters to students, as well as social media were utilized throughout the campaign. We collected information on university affiliation, role (faculty, staff, students, or industry participant), and topics of interest. Upon registration, a link to the food symposium was sent. The link was the same for all sessions to facilitate attendance and addressing potential technical problems during the symposium.

Quantitative data was analyzed using STATA (Version 16.1). We analyzed data using descriptive statistics and calculated relative frequencies and percentages for each

¹LSU representation included the School of Nutrition and Food Sciences, Department of Agricultural Economics and Agribusiness, School of Plant, Environmental and Soil Sciences, Agricultural Center Food Business Incubator, Innovation Center, and Pennington Biomedical Research Center. MENDELU representation included the Faculty of AgriSciences, Faculty of Horticulture, and Faculty of Regional Development and International Studies.

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Table 1.

Program Structure

Day	Time Slot: US/CZ time	Topic	Description
Monday, March 15	8-9 am US/ 2-3pm CZ	Welcome remarks, week at glance	Welcome remarks by upper administration of both universities
	9-11am US/ 3-5pm CZ	Food waste related topics. Short presentation and discussion on future cooperation	5 Presentations (3 from LSU and 2 from MENDELU), Q&A after each presentation, Live chat
Tuesday, March 16	7:30-9am US/ 1:30-3pm CZ	Kick off to NEW JOINT CLASS - International Comparative Analysis of Regional Food Systems	Student course open to all taught jointly by faculty from LSU and MENDELU
	8-10 am US/ 2-4pm CZ	Human nutrition; fruits and vegetables Nutrition into institutions Discussion: potential future projects	6 presentations by collaborative team consisting of 5 faculty from LSU and 1 faculty from MENDELU Q&A after each presentation, Live chat
	10-11 am US/ 4-5pm CZ	Student interactive session Intro to campuses, opportunities to visit partner's campus	Student interaction led jointly by staff from both institutions, Q&A, Live chat
Wednesday, March 17	8-10 am US/ 2-4pm CZ	Role of nutrition, medicinal plants, and superfood in healthy immune system during Covid 19	5 presentations (1 from LSU, 2 from MENDELU and 2 from separate unit of LSU) Q&A after each presentation, Live chat
Thursday, March 18	8-11 am US/ 2-5pm CZ	Food technology and production Videos on food production from CZ and US, non-traditional foods	7 presentations / videos (3 by LSU and 7 presenters from MENDELU), Q&A after each presentation, Live chat
Friday, March 19	8-10 am US/ 2-4pm CZ	Food safety	3 presentations by LSU faculty, Q&A after each presentation, Live chat
	10-11 am US/ 4-5pm CZ	Wrap up – Food Science Roundtable discussion	Discussion jointly led by both university faculty

question using total respondents as the denominator. Moreover, we were interested in seeing if specific topics appealed more to faculty and students. For this purpose, we used a proportions test.

Results and Discussion

Symposium Interest and Attendance

A total of 444 people registered for the Symposium. Sixty-seven percent of the registrants were affiliated with MENDELU, twenty-five percent with LSU, and the remaining eight percent were from industry, alumni, and other Universities (LSU partner institutions). Of the 444 registrants, seventy-five percent were students, thirteen percent were faculty, ten percent were staff, and the rest were from industry. Table 2 below provides information on the areas of interest participants selected upon registration.

We were interested in identifying potential differences in symposium topic areas as captured by participants' selections during registration. Further examination of the student and faculty populations registered for the symposium revealed an increased interest from students on the Food Waste topic. The proportions test was significant at 5% level ($p=0.1928$). The second topic that we noticed a difference between the number selected by students and faculty was the combined topics of Food technology and Food safety. The proportions test was significant at 10% level ($p=0.08914$).

Based on the interest, the attendees chose to participate in any or all sessions according to the program presented in Table 1. Participation by topic areas offered each day of the symposium is presented in Table 3. Participation varied by date and topic covered with an average of 132 attendees. Day five reported the minimum number of attendees (99 participants documented), and Day one was the most

Table 2.

Registration Topics Interest by Registrant Classification and Proportions Test

Areas	Frequency	Student (n=333)	Faculty (n=56)	Other
Nutrition	235	177 (75%)	24 (10%)	34 (15%)
Food Waste**	233	187 (81%)	22 (9%)	24 (10%)
Food Technology & Food Safety*	198	138 (70%)	30 (15%)	30 (15%)
Food Entrepreneurship	119	77 (65%)	17 (14%)	25 (21%)
Nutraceuticals & Functional Foods	119	86 (72%)	18 (15%)	15 (13%)
Horticulture	116	84 (72%)	15 (13%)	17 (15%)
Microbiology in Food Production	95	73 (77%)	9 (9%)	13 (14%)
Joint LSU-MENDELU course	73	57 (78%)	8 (11%)	8 (11%)
Interactive Student Roundtable	40	26 (65%)	7 (18%)	7 (18%)

attended day of the symposium (a total of 169 attendees). This can be attributed to a couple of factors including (a) first day of the symposium, and (b) increased interest in the food waste topic (selected from 233 out of 444 registrants).

The symposium was predominately attended by MENDELU students, faculty, and staff (69% of total participation). Considering the size of faculty, staff and student body in the respective institutions, variability in terms of participation is expected. The time of the symposium was selected to accommodate both institutions. Sessions were scheduled during regular class time for LSU and after class time hours for MENDELU, hence the authors cannot exclude the disproportion in participation because of scheduling conflicts. Last, we understand there is a positive relationship between promotion and registration and attendance; meaning that a more aggressive campaign (promotion, reminders, incentives, etc.) can increase registration and attendance. We did not offer registration and participation incentives and did not conduct a further investigation to see if we could identify observable differences between promotional activities by institution, explaining the higher levels of registration and participation by MENDELU. We note that LSU has a smaller number of faculty members and students in the respective disciplines compared to MENDELU.

The program was particularly attractive to students, who accounted for 71% of the attendees (multiple logins to account for overall attendance). Furthermore, as demonstrated in Table 3, students from MENDELU had the largest share of attendance. MENDELU offers degree programs in Czech, as well as English. The bulk of international students register in English-offered courses and programs. For the students taking classes in Czech, English is a second language in which they are striving to acquire proficiency. Therefore, discussions during the symposium presented a unique opportunity for the students and faculty to improve their English proficiency, which was valued as an additional benefit. Also, MENDELU language professors directed their students to participate in the symposium in

lieu of their English lesson that week. The strongest student interest gauged by attendance transpired within the first two days of the symposium with food waste and human nutrition (as they relate to fruits and vegetables) sessions, as well as the kickoff of the first joint course between the two partner universities. However, the strongest student engagement within the chat section of the symposium was recorded on Friday during the wrap-up roundtable session with many questions about future student opportunities.

Outcomes, Planned and in-progress Activities, and Established Linkages

The food symposium capitalized on existing synergies between the two universities and established name recognition at partner campuses. The challenge faced was to see how the symposium could add to the synergies and create opportunities for linkages in areas with potential. The symposium allowed for successful identification of collaboration topics, formation of working research groups and a better understanding of target groups for future programmatic efforts.

As part of early program collaboration, a team working on food system comparison was developed offering a joint course and working on a number of publications and grant applications. During the symposium, the synergy was rekindled and grew adding another international university partner in its subsequent course edition. Moreover, members of the group currently work on two grant proposals identifying opportunities for future joint research. Other topics of common interest with on-going discussions for collaborative projects include Food Waste and Farm-to-table programs. Food Technology and Food Safety topics are also of a high interest to both universities offering opportunities for students to hone their practical skill within internship programs; one of which is initiated this summer.

During the Food Symposium, the joint course and the roundtable session led by students themselves, proved to be especially valued both introducing and promoting academic programs and research opportunities for students in both institutions as well as serving as a platform

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Table 3.

Food Symposium Attendance by Topic Areas, by Participant Classification

Topic Areas	Frequency	%
Day 1: Food Waste (169 attendees)		
LSU	33	20
Faculty	13	8
Student	11	7
Other	9	5
MENDELU	124	73
Faculty	9	5
Student	103	61
Other	12	7
OTHER	12	7
Day 2: Human Nutrition; fruits & vegetables (148 attendees)		
LSU	59	40
Faculty	16	11
Student	31	21
Other	12	8
MENDELU	85	57
Faculty	3	2
Student	77	52
Other	5	3
OTHER	4	3
Day 3: Role of Nutrition; (118 attendees)		
LSU	27	23
Faculty	9	8
Student	7	6
Other	11	9
MENDELU	84	71
Faculty	7	6
Student	70	59
Other	7	6
OTHER	4	3
Day 4: Food Technology; (128 attendees)		
LSU	22	17
Faculty	7	5
Student	6	5
Other	9	7

Table 3 cont.

Food Symposium Attendance by Topic Areas, by Participant Classification

Topic Areas	Frequency	%
MENDELU	101	79
Faculty	10	8
Student	80	63
Other	11	9
OTHER	5	4
Day 5: Food Safety; (99 attendees)		
LSU	29	29
Faculty	7	7
Student	17	17
Other	5	5
MENDELU	63	64
Faculty	6	6
Student	53	54
Other	4	4
OTHER	7	7

of student needs for future programming. As a result, the number of students enrolled in this joint course nearly doubled after the symposium kick-off (eight students prior to the symposium versus 15 at the end of the week) and a new idea for a similar course is in pursuit. Moreover, the roundtable session generated interest from students from both universities to study abroad.

The roundtable discussion provided the opportunity for further exploration of teaching-related synergies between the two institutions. The first initiative is an additional online joint course across food disciplines (technology, nutrition, safety, horticulture, and economics) showcasing the linkages among the disciplines. Through faculty exchange programs and virtual seminars, food safety specialists will host a series of food safety lectures at MENDELU comparing food safety regulations. Moreover, the two institutions will offer student trainings in their respective labs.

Conclusion and Lessons Learned

The Food Symposium offered students from both institutions the opportunity to engage with their international peers. During COVID-19, both institutions transitioned to remote-learning. The emphasis was given to instructional support for students and faculty alike (replicate face-to-face activities, adapt, and restructure courses). As institutions safeguarded student, faculty and staff wellbeing following social distancing, stay-at-home orders, and health guidelines, few options were given to students to engage with peers in extracurricular activities. A void was created by the stress to adapt to the ‘New Normal’ and the inability

to travel. While dealing with the so termed zoom fatigue, universities also needed to find novel ways to engage their students and faculty in research and educational activities.

HE institutions continually adapt and adopt strategies to better tackle the needs and challenges of globalization and internationalization. The pandemic will bring to light changes in institutional roles and responsibilities which will be driven by student, staff, and faculty experiences during the pandemic and as we adapt to the ‘New Normal’ reality. Thus, through adapting to COVID-19 challenges, new opportunities in HE institutional international collaborations are presented to us allowing for a wider reach, and creative ideas in teaching and research in effort to elevate educational quality. Opportunities and areas of exploration do not necessarily fall in adapting academic programs and curricular (e.g., offering more synchronous mode courses with international counterparts engaging students, etc.) but it can be in the form of exploring more grant opportunities for hybrid and virtual conferences, and investing in technology among others.

The strategic decision to transition to a virtual Food Symposium and offer it at a time where international engagement was limited, instead of postponing it for next year, was deemed a success. With all university travel programs cancelled on both ends, the Food Symposium offered an opportunity for ‘internationalization at-home’. With access to many European Union exchange programs such as the European Community Action Scheme for the mobility of university students ERASMUS+, MENDELU students are generally more involved internationally than their counterparts from LSU. LSU students are generally

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offered multiple opportunities within study abroad programs, but only a handful engage in a full semester abroad. A jointly organized Food Symposium between two international HE institutions either with partial or fully online presence allows for increased inclusion of participants and provides platform for diverse opinions. The successful launch of the first LSU-MENDELU joint online course, direct student interaction, a number of new linkages between faculty for both teaching and research, are just some direct outcomes benefitting both universities.

The authors believe that the LSU-MENDELU strategic partnership represents a model that can be translated, adapted, and incorporated into international program partnerships among HE institutions. In particular, for US institutions that want to build a sustainable comprehensive partnership with any international university, and vice versa, the partnership can serve as an example and point of reference. The success of the partnership is attributed to a multi-year, multi-level approach aimed at understanding synergies and barriers for joint projects. In addition to elevating a two-way international partnership among universities, organizing a similar symposium built around a topic of relevance can benefit various international associations and partnerships. In our case, ongoing joint reflection provides strong guidance for improvement, as we aim to incorporate this event in future collaborations and consider temporary versus permanent innovative approaches.

Some of the most valuable lessons learned from this event relate to (a) offering an engaging virtual program, (b) engaging students and (c) keeping communication at the time of the symposium and after its conclusion. While there is no problem securing valuable speakers, attention needs to be paid to creating a program which can cultivate discussions. It is helpful for each topic to include focused researchers or research teams from both universities. In many instances, those can be multi-disciplinary. Moreover, a strong potential for the future lies with including students in the scientific process during such event, whether it be as discussion participants or workshop leaders. Finally, attention and time in preparation must be devoted to working with IT for optimal setting within the technology of choice for organizing such event. We strongly suggest having an IT specialist and a team working in the background logistically supporting presenters and discussions, including the chat section.

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