Taking virtual reality equipment to your institution’s study abroad fair provides students with a great opportunity to explore potential study abroad sites and offers an engaging outreach opportunity for your library. Using Google Earth VR, participants can immerse themselves—even if just for a few minutes—and take a virtual “walk” through campuses around the world. By displaying the user’s VR view on a large, prominently located screen at the fair, you are not only helping to promote your school’s study abroad programs but also boosting awareness of your library and its resources. VR technology allows an opportunity for casual, cost-free immersion, and it can serve as an icebreaker to open communication and build relationships between students, librarians, and study abroad staff. Students are excited to interact and share experiences with their peers and librarians when using VR. This event also allows librarians to connect with faculty and staff across campus to demonstrate library technology and teaching resources.
COST CONSIDERATIONS

If your library or school already has access to VR equipment, no other purchases are necessary, and staff time will be your only cost consideration for this program. Otherwise, purchasing new VR equipment could cost $1,000 (or more).

OVERVIEW

Helping students use VR at your campus’s study abroad fair is more than just eye-catching entertainment; it benefits your students and your library. VR offers students a convenient low-stakes opportunity for global exploration. Students stay within their relative comfort zone while wandering through multiple worldwide destinations for free during lunch or a break between classes. VR allows students interested in study abroad (or those just curious about the world) to self-direct their own immersive, informal learning experience and discuss what interests them. This promotes meaningful
interactions between peers, librarians, study abroad staff, and other mentors. While students are engaged with the VR program, librarians and study abroad staff can connect with them and enhance their experience by pointing out landmarks, giving directions, and answering questions as they naturally arise. VR removes travel boundaries and invites students to share their impressions and memories with others. Also, the VR view projected onto the “big screen” will inspire excitement and curiosity from participants and observers alike. During your conversations with students, you will encounter many opportunities to promote additional library services and materials.

Using VR applications in your institution’s study abroad fair offers a flexible means of creating a program tailored to your specific event. To provide maximum visibility and accommodate the most participants, you will want to be present and facilitate the VR use for the entire duration of the fair. For a medium-sized crowd (our campus’s study abroad fair is four hours long and attended by approximately eight hundred students), have at least two library staff members at the booth. Larger or longer fairs will require additional staff. For most of the fair, both staff members should engage with students (one by guiding the VR user, the other by conversing with crowd members and managing the waitlist). You will also appreciate the presence of a colleague to provide breaks during slower times. Both staff members will need to know how to operate and control your VR technology and instruct others on how to navigate the Google Earth VR software.

Keep in mind that VR technology causes motion sickness for many users. Let participants know this is a possibility as they put on the headset, and tell participants to remove the headset if they feel uncomfortable. I experience motion sickness when using VR software, and when I facilitated this program, I found that just watching the VR view on a screen could cause the same queasiness. Looking away or closing one’s eyes reduces these effects but makes facilitating the program difficult or impossible. If you or one of your colleagues experiences VR-related motion sickness, arrange alternate or additional staffing for the event. Even if VR doesn’t affect you negatively, be sensitive to the fact that some of your participants may experience motion sickness. Monitor participants for any distress, and always be ready to help them remove the headset if they mention dizziness, nausea, headaches, or feeling warm and sweaty. Have empty chairs nearby that do not face the screen so students can sit and recover as needed. While VR can be exciting and fun to many, please recognize and respect that it makes some of us very ill.
NECESSARY EQUIPMENT AND MATERIALS

- VR equipment (HTC Vive or Oculus Rift)
- A computer with Steam and Google Earth VR installed
- Tripods, extension cords, ethernet cables (the material you will need to set up your VR at another site)
- A projection screen or a monitor to display the VR user's view. A large and prominently placed screen at the front of the room is preferable
- Signage to indicate you are from the library (and about how students can access your VR technology)
- A waitlist: We used the low-tech option of paper and pencil and just called out people's names. You may want to enlist technology that can help you keep a waitlist of your participants.
- Sanitizing wipes or spray to disinfect the VR headset between users. You can swap out replacement foam face pads in your VR headset to make sanitizing easier.

STEP-BY-STEP INSTRUCTIONS

Preparation

- Build a partnership with your study abroad department or staff members who coordinate the fair. Suggest the inclusion of a VR “booth” and offer to facilitate this activity at the next fair. If colleagues are unsure how this would work, offer to demonstrate: Invite them to the library for a brief “show and tell” Google Earth VR session. In our case, this turned out to be a key step. Seeing what the technology could do in person convinced them not only to invite us to host a table at the fair, but they also featured the VR station at the front of the ballroom on the main projection screen and mentioned our VR program in their publicity materials. Note: If your study abroad fair offers any free food or beverage, see if it is possible for the library’s VR booth to be located near those refreshment stands. Students enjoying free popcorn and lemonade with their friends are eager participants and a more patient audience, whereas a booth located near an entrance/exit may not have the same draw.
- Before the fair, create favorite locations in your Google Earth that correspond to your school’s study abroad sites. Ask your study abroad
coordinator for a list of your current program locations and place your Google Earth favorites as close as possible to the center of your partner campuses. You can place favorites in the town centers instead, but we found that our students were much more eager to explore and revisit partner institutions’ campuses.

- Arrive at the fair location well in advance to set up equipment and troubleshoot tech issues. Give yourself at least thirty extra minutes to set up your mobile VR system, test out display screens, and tape down cords. You will likely encounter some unforeseen snags: For us, it was internet connection issues.

- After running through the VR sensors’ setup, tape or cordon off the floor-space where your VR users will be. Make sure there are no obstacles or tripping hazards in this area and place tables or signs to prevent others from accidentally wandering into this space.

**Program Instructions**

- Invite interested students near your booth to try out the library’s VR system and explore a study abroad location. Students may be shy at first but opening with some casual conversation helps. Try asking students where they might want to study abroad or if they have ever tried VR before. If another student is using the VR, tell the other student(s) about the location that participant is exploring and ask if they’d like to try it out next.

- Briefly explain the headset and controllers and how to move around in Google Earth VR to the student before they begin. If the student has already used VR, this won’t be necessary; even for those who have not, keep this intro very short. Usually, only a few seconds of preparation are needed when a user is putting on the headset. Students often learn the controls best by using them. Start the student’s VR experience in the study abroad location they request using your preset favorite locations in Google Earth VR. Once the student has put on the headset, hand them the controllers and slowly walk them through the first few motions by watching their view on the screen and directing them to the correct buttons to push to move through Google Earth. They may need verbal or physical help locating and pressing buttons or adjusting their grip on the controllers; remember: they can’t see you.
• Once the student can navigate independently, let them explore freely and strike up a conversation about what they are seeing. Encourage observation and let students take the lead to discuss buildings, people, nature . . . whatever interests them about the place they are viewing. Facilitate conversations between the participant and others (whom they cannot see and may not be able to hear clearly). You will notice that students who have studied abroad are eager to show their friends where they traveled, and study abroad staff are delighted to see students virtually exploring their sites. One program coordinator at our fair temporarily abandoned his booth in his excitement to give directions to the train station for a student wandering through his German hometown.

• The staff person who is not assisting the VR user should engage observers, manage the waitlist, and prepare additional participants. Having the next participant “on deck” is recommended to keep the line flowing smoothly. To further streamline the process during busy periods, the waitlist staff member can deliver a brief intro regarding the VR controls to the next user while they observe the current user. This allows the next person to seamlessly jump into the Google Earth VR app and navigate it more easily. If the waitlist includes more than a few people, you can advise students to check out some nearby booths and let them know you will call their name when it is their turn.

• Keep the VR user on track and keep things moving. Depending on the crowd, you may not need to restrict the students to specific places within Google Earth or keep strict time limits for sessions. This is recommended for larger crowds or if you have a constant waitlist of participants. When no one else was waiting, we encouraged students to check out multiple study abroad locations or even roam the globe freely. This can cause confusion for observers, though. For example, they might wonder why a student is viewing the Eifel Tower when your school has no study abroad sites in Paris. To avoid this issue, try to redirect students by suggesting they explore the nearest study abroad location leading to their point of interest. You can always encourage their natural curiosity (and plug library resources) by suggesting a future trip to the library VR lab to explore all the wonders of Google Earth at their leisure. When you have a waitlist, aim for five minutes or less per user so that a good number of people can experience the technology during the fair. Between users, sanitize the VR headset.
RECOMMENDED NEXT PROJECTS

Consider partnering further with your study abroad colleagues or faculty members who lead immersion trips. Google Earth VR can make for excellent pre- and post-trip activities. Are there places that faculty wish students could familiarize themselves with before they travel? Can students returning from study abroad lead virtual tours of some of their favorite places for other students? For students who cannot travel (for example, due to prohibitive costs, anxiety, family obligations, or the pandemic), VR equipment can offer an opportunity to explore the world at one’s own pace for free without ever leaving campus. Think about how your VR technology can benefit all students through immersive experiences and get creative about potential campus partnerships. Your campus’s language classrooms might use VR to practice giving directions, translate real-world signs, or analyze culture in public spaces. A hospitality class can create and present Google Earth virtual tours as a final class project.

As you encourage your students to explore the world through VR, consider exploring and experimenting regarding all the different/new ways VR can help students learn and connect with others. While virtual science labs and STEM applications are currently the more well-known uses of VR, academic libraries have numerous opportunities to expand VR’s use in humanities and social sciences instruction. When you give students the opportunity to play with your library’s VR equipment at outreach events, such as a study abroad fair or during their classes, you are building awareness of library resources and engaging, entertaining, and educating your audience all at the same time.