

## Enriching Engineering Education with Cultural and Social Aspects in a Study Abroad Program.

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**Abstract** — For the past six years the Michigan State University College of Engineering has been sending students on a study abroad program to Russia. During this time we have achieved significant results not only in terms of education and research, but also in the development of successful models for incorporating cultural experiences into our academic exchange. The program started as a one-month stay in Volgograd, during which students took one engineering course from an American faculty member who taught using the facilities of the Volgograd State Architectural and Civil Engineering University. The number of participating students has almost doubled each year, with last year's total reaching 70 students in 17 classes taught by faculty from three different MSU colleges. The cultural part of the program has been facilitated by developing an innovative Integrated Arts and Humanities (IAH) course that combines Russian culture and language. Most students take this course in order to satisfy their general humanities requirements. In this course students receive language and cultural knowledge that provides them with a deeper understanding of Russian life and society. In addition to their stay in Volgograd, students visit Moscow and St. Petersburg. In all three cities students take multiple field trips to sites of cultural, historical and social importance. These visits are prepared by the culture lectures and find lively reflection in the papers that the students write for the class. The lectures are intended to make the students more knowledgeable about the Russian past and present and to view Russian culture within the context of key ideas and issues in human experience. As writing is fundamental to learning in the humanities the course is writing intensive, which means that ample opportunities for writing are provided that involve considerable student-instructor interaction. Students are asked to not only experience Russian culture, but to actively engage with it. Beginning language study helps the students to overcome the barrier of being linguistically isolated in a foreign culture, and also helps them develop their basic skills in the target language environment. The comments that we hear after the students return are quite powerful. For example, students say that this experience has changed their lives, helped them to develop a deeper appreciation for their own culture and society, or that the trip was "eye-opening" and "a once in a lifetime event". The experience is very beneficial when it comes to employment. A number of our students have told us that the Russian trip was the only thing discussed in their job interviews. The

*cultural and social experience gained through our Study Abroad program distinguishes our students on a personal and professional level. Overall, we are convinced that this program for engineers, who are frequently deprived of culture-related subjects in their curriculum, has been very successful and is a template well worth sharing. We are committed to growing all aspects of the program each year, including the development of new educational models that bring together the professional, cultural and social spheres.*