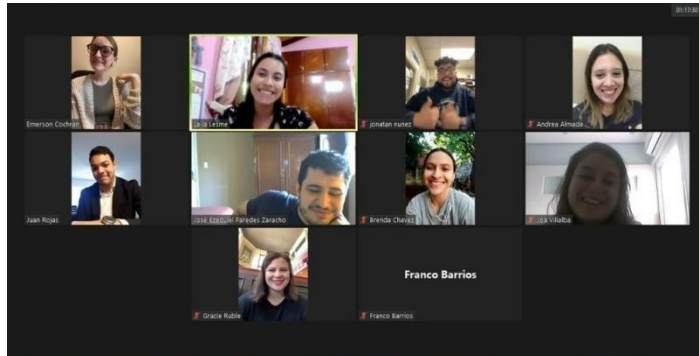




Kansans and Paraguayans connect for English conversations through ‘Give-back’ program



For four weeks, students from several Kansas universities met with Paraguayans on Zoom every Saturday for an hour to discuss various topics in an English conversation ‘Give-Back’ program.

Leila Lesme, of Paraguay, studied at Pittsburg State University through the BECAL scholarship program in the Spring 2021 semester. As a recipient of the prestigious scholarship, she had the

opportunity to in turn help others through a ‘Give-Back’ program. She drew from her own experiences as a student to create the idea for her ‘Give-Back’.

“To receive my scholarship, I went through many interviews/speeches and in that process, I was a bit afraid about my English level,” she said. “Even when I was already at PSU, I was a little shy about my accent or making some grammatical mistakes when speaking, so I thought that this could be very useful to people that feel the same way I did.”

Lesme thought the opportunity to create a program would be a good way to help Paraguayan students to interact more with native English speakers and learn about American culture.

“When I had the opportunity to give others the chance to practice English without the tense setting of an interview and also with people from the United States (native speakers), I did not even hesitate to try it,” she said.

For the conversation sessions, they were open to any Paraguayan students from anywhere in the country to participate, and Lesme asked American friends of hers that she met while on exchange to be involved. Students from Pittsburg State University, Wichita State University, and Emporia State University participated. The participants met in Zoom and were divided into groups in breakout rooms and given a topic to discuss.

Emerson Cochran, a PSU student, participated in the program and used it as a way to give-back and help others in a similar way to how she was supported at PSU.

“I learned on my study abroad trip to Spain and how I couldn't have done it without the help of PSU's Honors College,” she said. “It felt like a small way I could pay it forward to help create that cultural experience for someone else.”

The conversation sessions had a variety of benefits for both the students in Paraguay and in Kansas, including the opportunity to exchange opinions, points of views, cultures, and to practice English.



Leila and Gus the Gorilla. Photo credit: Leila Lesme



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Although there were specific topics for the rooms, the students were allowed to go off topic and simply talk about themselves, their interests, and have fun.

“My favorite part of the program was when we would get off-topic and exchange great ideas about our cultures,” Cochrane said. “I also enjoyed it when the second language learners took control of the conversation and exercised their English skills. Several of them were self-taught, and I was very impressed by their drive to learn.”