AMUN SIMULATION GUIDE SUPPLEMENT: HOW TO PREPARE FOR A VIRTUAL MODEL UN CONFERENCE

Introduction

Virtual Model UN shares many attributes with an in-person conference, but the differences will require some changes in the way you prepare your delegation, and in the way the conference plays out for the delegates. This section will look at the similarities and differences between virtual and in-person conferences, provide some suggestions for modifications for the virtual environment and offer some additional tools for your preparation.

Preparing for a virtual conference will be very similar to a typical conference year. Students will still spend most of their time researching their country and the topics in their simulation. This research can involve group or individual preparation for the country, and if you are representing multiple countries, delegates with similar topics can share and/or coordinate their research before the conference, so long as this does not lead to inappropriate collaboration between countries at the conference.

Preparation for formal speaking at the conference and for the rules of procedure will also be very similar. Students will need to be trained and be comfortable making public speeches in front of their peers, so they should still practice preparing and giving speeches — and asking and responding to questions. The rules of procedure will also be very similar (with only a few changes to fit the online format), so students will need to be trained on how to use those rules and work within them to achieve their goals.

Students will also need to learn how to work with others (and practice this skill) while caucusing in an informal environment. Faculty and student leaders can use tools such as practice simulations or role playing scenarios to facilitate that learning.

Even with all of these similarities, though, there are important differences to consider in an online conference environment. Delegates will not be in the same room as their peers, and will need to work in a virtual environment. The virtual conference will likely mean fewer opportunities for easy chatting on the side of the room or in a hotel lobby, although these interactions may be facilitated or simulated—especially depending on the platform. The virtual environment may also mean working with slightly greater restrictions in caucusing, as it will be harder for large groups of people to all caucus at the same time. For example, simulating a full African bloc, with over 50 countries all trying to get the attention of the group, is never easy—but the move online will make this much more complicated, since bandwidth may be limited, and the interruptions and simultaneous talking that can be managed in

person through nonverbal cues and compromise become unwieldy in an online conferencing environment. A rowdy caucus session could quickly become frustrating as people fight to be heard, connectivity problems may arise, and entire blocks of conversation may be cut out. Thus a little more formality may be needed in caucusing settings in order to accomplish the work of the body.

The following are some suggestions for how to better prepare for an online conference. These apply regardless of whether your class/club is meeting in-person, or virtually.

Research

As most Model UN research is now conducted online, this area of preparation should be the easiest to replicate in a virtual setting. If they are not already doing so, students may want to take advantage of collaborative tools and platforms that allow sharing of files, links, etc. to assist in their research. In the age of COVID and the move to remote instruction, many students and faculty will have already developed best practices and preferred tools.

- **Use research to practice speaking.** Many Model UN groups also use the research process as an opportunity to allow students to share their research and to gain experience speaking in front of others. This practice can provide a low stress, low-stakes environment for training delegates, especially those with no Model UN experience, no public speaking experience, or who perhaps have a fear of public speaking.

- **Facilitate collaboration.** Faculty or student leaders can set up synchronous video conferencing platforms (e.g., Zoom, Blackboard Collaborate, Google Meet, Teams, and many others) to allow presentations and sharing of information with your Model UN group. While screen sharing can be allowed in some cases (perhaps sharing information about your country), it is recommended that students not use screen sharing, as this is a tool/crutch that they may not have at the conference. Sitting at a computer and sharing information with your group, even in a very informal setting, is a great way to do introductory speaking practice. Faculty and students can also use the tools of asynchronous communication, such as discussion boards, wikis, or email to keep each other apprised of their research progress.

Speech preparation

Groups engage in a wide variety of exercises to prepare speakers, and almost all of those can translate online with small modifications. There are many things that virtual speech practice can add to what normally do in classes/clubs:

- **Types of Speeches**
  - **Prepared speeches: Video (asynchronous) versus live (synchronous) presentations**: both of these are an option when doing virtual prep, and both have advantages. Students will absolutely need to practice making live, synchronous speeches in front of their class/club mates. This is the format that will be used at the conference, and there is no substitute for conducting live speeches or practice sessions in advance. Prepared

speeches may be given during a practice simulation, and students can also present their research to the group.

- **Extemporaneous speeches:** Sometimes during Conference, students may not have the opportunity to fully prepare and practice a set speech; instead, they will be giving extemporaneous speeches as the simulation evolves. This type of speech will be easiest to practice during a live/synchronous simulation.
- **Q&A:** Students will also want to practice asking questions (of their peers) and answering questions based on the speeches they have given. This process will simulate the "Points of Inquiry" that are available at AMUN.

- **Modes of delivery and recording**
  - **Synchronous:** If you are conducting Face-to-Face classes or synchronous remote classes, you will have the opportunity for students to practice in a live environment. Additionally, most video conferencing software also has a record feature, so instructors and students can refer to recorded work at a later date (provided it is posted and made available).
  - **Asynchronous:** Asynchronous practice most likely involves video (or audio) recording of students' speeches and posting them to a course Learning Management System (LMS) site, or a platform such as Flipgrid. Video recording presentations is also a great way to prepare students. Students and faculty can also provide written or recorded comments and constructive critiques in response. Asynchronous practice allows viewers to comment on or review specific points in time and reference places in the recording where someone had great content or technique, and others where improvements are needed.
  - **A note on video and audio recording:** Most students have never seen themselves present on video, and if they are like most humans they will seriously dislike the way they look/sound. It is important for faculty and students to reinforce both the positives of each speech, and that almost everyone feels strange when seeing themselves on tape for the first time (or in some cases, for the 1,000[th] time!)

- **Assessment**
  - **Multiple opportunities.** Each speech offers an opportunity for assessment by the student, their peers and faculty members.
  - **Assessment categories.** Assessment may be based on any number of categories, including content, delivery, time, organization, etc. Faculty members may want to emphasize different speaking skills for different speeches.
  - **Self and peer critique.** Students may complete self assessment based on recorded presentations, and students can also be assessed on their comments/critiques of their peers.

- **Presentation tips for the online environment**
  - **Preparation is key.** In a virtual environment, students will still need to put thought into their speech content, organization, and delivery, as they would for any in-person

conference, although the virtual environment does offer some advantages, such as having easier access to prepared remarks or notes. Some students may be comfortable speaking extemporaneously or with just a few bullet points—and, indeed, these are great skills to practice—but many students will want to have more extensive notes or a prepared speech. Students should practice using notes or prepared remarks on their computer or workspace, so they can present effectively and still maintain (virtual) eye contact with the camera.

- **Formality and Informality.** Speaking in front of a group tends to feel very formal, but many students (and professionals!) may adopt a more informal style when presenting virtually. Very few people realize that the things they do naturally, and quirks that they may show on camera, may detract from how others view their presentation. There are a few simple tips to assist students in giving a stronger, more professional virtual speech:

- **Look into the camera.** This skill sounds easy, but it must be said, and practiced. Students will need to train themselves on how to look into their video camera when speaking. Looking away from the camera is much more obvious when it is just the speakers head and shoulders highlighted on a small screen.

- **Keep a consistent distance from the camera and microphone**. When presenting virtually, it is important to keep the same relative position to your camera and microphone at all times. Significant head movements in particular can change the sound quality, or cause your voice to fade or even drop out. While facial and upper body movements are still often a part of a good speaker's repertoire, these need to be slightly more controlled when on camera.

- **Gestures.** Students should also study their hand gestures and movements. If gesturing is natural and integral to a speaking style, students will want to make sure their camera is set up to capture them appropriately.

- **Camera and microphone placement** Participants should arrange and check these in advance of the conference. Cameras are generally best placed at or slightly above eye-level for the speaker. Proper microphone distances vary greatly based on the type of microphone the speaker is using.

- **Consider the background**. Students will not be required to be on camera for AMUN; however, if students choose to use the video camera, they should take care to broadcast a tidy background. Additionally, whenever possible, participants will want to have a generally quiet background—although it is true that life carries on even while a virtual conference is taking place. Minimizing interruptions and distractions will help you maintain a professional environment and will enhance the simulation by keeping everyone focused on representing their country well.

- **Professional Attire**. AMUN expects that all participants wear professional attire while on camera, at least for the parts of their attire that will show on the camera itself. Professional attire is expected of UN diplomats. This also both helps students to be accepted as a diplomat by their peers, and tends to help the student get into the role of the diplomat.

- **Caucusing**. Caucusing (or informal debate) is one of the primary areas in which a virtual conference differs from in-person. At an in-person conference, delegates tend to call across a large room to organize different blocs (African bloc, Asian, developing countries, etc.) and everyone then congregates together. This process leads to a lot of people talking at once until the organized chaos can be sorted out. After that time, caucusing sessions are likely to break into smaller groups, and occasionally meet back together in larger groups.

  The dynamics of an online conference change this. Many people cannot talk at once, or the video feed is unlikely to pick up anyone. It will thus be much harder for large groups to form and function. Open discussions like a Model UN caucus tend to function better via video and audio conferencing when done with smaller groups, and delegates will need to organize themselves to make this happen.

  This will likely mean that after an initial meeting with a larger group, small groups will need to form to work on segments of a resolution, or on different resolutions, and then come together to compare, negotiate and potentially combine final products.

  While some delegates may be able to move between groups (depending on the limitations of the software), messaging and chatting may be much more useful in communicating with others who are not in your group.

  In addition, shared documents (on Google Docs or similar platforms) will be even more useful online than they are in-person, as many people will likely only be seeing the documents online in this shared format.

  Practicing a caucus session can be done with a real topic (something from the conference), or a made up topic (like "which is better, Coke or Pepsi?"). The key is to have an informal environment where there is not a moderator, and where the students need to work out how people speak without talking over each other, how to get work done and share ideas, and how to create and modify resolutions.

- **Training for formal procedure and rules**. This process is very similar online to what you might do in a classroom. The AMUN Simulation Guide has many ideas and sample simulations which can be easily converted to an online format. The key is to have the Chairperson lead the meeting and recognize participants to speak. Hands can be raised (electronically or on camera if everyone is visible) to express a desire to speak or make a motion. Points can also be raised by raising hands, and/or by chatting to the room or to the Chairperson that you have a point of order, information or inquiry. Draft resolutions/amendments can be shared on screen, or on a sharing site with a link provided. Voting can be done by raising hands in the software that you are using. The key here is to get the students accustomed to the more formal flow of debate in a formal session, and to utilizing the main rules that will come up during that session.

- **Opening Speeches**. AMUN is taking advantage of the virtual setting to offer a new way to introduce your delegation to other schools this year – the video Opening Speech. Each country will be given the opportunity to record a brief Opening Speech for each simulation, similar to the

opening speeches made each year by Presidents, Prime Ministers and other dignitaries at the opening of the UN General Assembly in New York. This speech should be a general discussion of the issues that are most important to your delegation, and the solutions that you would like to see implemented. The speeches will be taped and uploaded, with directions forthcoming, and then posted for all delegations to view before the Conference. These speeches are a great opportunity for your group to work together to discuss your goals across the conference, as would happen in the actual UN. Many countries have common goals across the various committees/councils, and these can be highlighted in this video speech.

During the conference

During the conference, we recommend that faculty advisors, club leaders, and permanent representatives observe committee sessions and, when possible, their representatives in action. Online conferencing platforms may make it possible to send each other direct messages when something important is happening, or your group may choose to use an external messaging application/platform.

- **Daily/nightly meetings with your delegation**. Many Model UN teams/classes schedule a meeting after the last session of the evening to review what happened across the various simulations, to share ideas, to vent, and to help each other prepare for the next day. This can still be accomplished in a virtual environment. Depending on the size of the group, it may be possible to use an area that is open to all delegates in the conference platform for your group to meet. Alternately, you can use whatever platform your school typically uses (Zoom, Google Meet, etc.) to set a nightly meeting after the last sessions end. Morning meetings before the sessions start are another alternative here. This is an area where schools do not have to stay within the platform provided by the conference, and creativity is encouraged.

Post-conference

This is another important question to consider in the virtual environment. The AMUN conference is scheduled earlier this year, recognizing that many schools will either end their semester/quarter early due to the pandemic, or move to all online instruction. While this may be helpful to many groups in terms of allowing them to attend the conference, for classes in particular it raises the potential challenge of what to do in the remaining weeks of the semester after the conference ends. The following are several ideas, but there are many more things you can do:

- **MUN to real-world links.** Hold one or more classes to link what was learned through Model UN to what happens at the real United Nations in New York during the year. This can focus on specific topics that the students researched, on the general process of UN diplomacy, or on a variety of other areas.

- **Bring in guest speakers for the group.** Virtual classrooms open a wide variety of educational tools for creative leaders. One area that groups have used is inviting guest speakers from across the US or around the world to join the class for 30-60 minutes. While it may not be possible to speak with someone at the WHO in-person, it can be much easier to work around a guest

speaker's schedule if you are only asking them for an hour or so of their time. This may include UN secretariat members, diplomats, or other speakers who would be of interest to the class/club.

- **Debrief sessions.** Hold one or more debriefing sessions to talk with your students about their experience at the conference. These can be open, or you can create prompts to lead the discussion. Debriefing questions can focus on what the students learned (in preparations and/or at the conference), what academic lessons came out of the experience (about topics, countries, the UN process, etc), and/or how they experienced personal growth through the conference.
- **Have a social meeting online.** One of the best parts of the Model UN experience is that groups often bond socially while preparing for a conference, and they will likely miss that part of the experience when the conference ends. Faculty and student leaders can help with this by planning social time with the group online after the conference.

This document provides a preliminary set of ideas to help you in preparing for Virtual AMUN or other online Model UN conferences. We are always open to the ideas and questions of others, and are happy to incorporate other ideas that you provide into future iterations. Please email us at mail@amun.org with any questions or thoughts for improvements/additions.