Navigating Muddy Waters

Best VE/COIL Practices for Engaging in Civil Dialogue around Challenging Topics

ACE's Virtual Exchange/COIL Transformation webinar series.

September 21st 2022

Rafael TYSZBLAT

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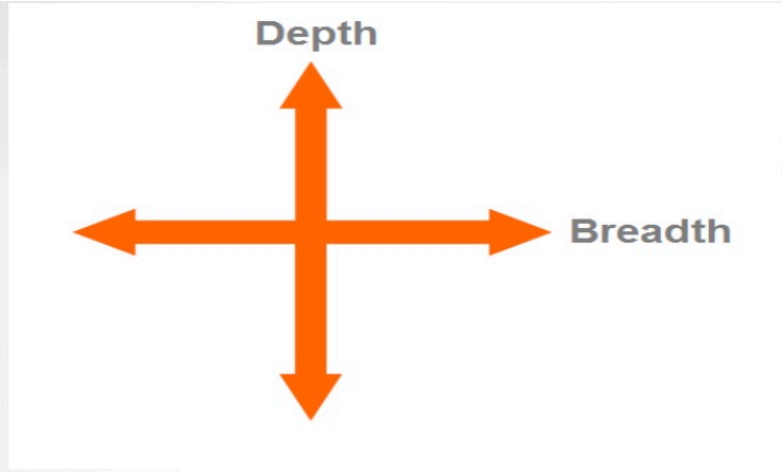
RELIABLY TRANSFORMATIONAL

- An international nonprofit organization preparing the next generation with the skills, attitudes, and commitment to engage with difference constructively.
- Using digital dialogue and facilitation training methodologies to empower young adults with the skills necessary for effective relations in a 21st century society and workforce

Virtual Exchange

Technology-enabled, people-to-people education programs

- Context: Unprecedented interconnectedness
- Opportunities / threats: information silos or polarization
- Use of technology presents an opportunity to combine depth (dialogue) and breadth (technology) to establish more cooperative, and compassionate relations within and between societies.



Goals of Dialogue & Exchange

Cross-cultural communication & collaboration

Empathy, critical awareness

Engaging with difference constructively, curiosity

Soliya's Dialogue Model

- Sustained engagement
- Spaced learning
- Focus on synchronous exchange
- Small, diverse groups
- Semi-structured curriculum: compulsory activities and topics & free flowing dialogue
- Facilitated by trained, neutral and multipartial facilitators
- Learner-led process (ownership of content and process)
- Safe space that is also uncomfortable
- Exploring intercultural differences as well as power dynamics
- Meta-discussions: not just learning on content but on process

CONNECT
PROGRAM™

The Connect Program

- Designed by Soliya, to be integrated into an existing curriculum or offered as an independent study.
- Participants meet on our exchange portal, exchanging for around an hour per week asynchronously and 2 hours per week through live sessions.
- Topics include: *Values and social norms, stereotypes and cultural misunderstandings, gender, global/social inequality, digital world and communication, immigration/integration, environment, religion, foreign policy*
- Instructors receive weekly reports detailing attendance, topics and exercises. Final student performance reports include detailed feedback and evaluation.
- Participants also receive a certificate of completion and get access to the Exchange Portal and its network of global alumni.
- Fully funded by the Stevens' Initiative for the United States and the MENA.

The Connect Program

- CONNECT GLOBAL for discussions framed around current social challenges and world events. Specialized Track - Foreign Affairs. – 8 weeks

- CONNECT COLLABORATE hones team-building and collaboration skills through project based learning activities such as an online awareness campaign developed to address a topic of current relevance. – 5 weeks

- CONNECT EXPRESS encourages thoughtful discourse in a digital society and explores how identity constructs and assumed archetypes influence engagement across divides. Presented as an option for those participants or course with greater time constraints. – 4 weeks

The Connect Program

Topics:

- Values and social norms
- Stereotypes and cultural misunderstandings
- Gender
- Global/social inequality
- Conflict
- Migration
- Poverty
- Global health and covid 19
- Digital world and communication
- Immigration/integration
- Environment
- Religion
- Foreign policy
- Globalism and Nationalism
- Governance and values
- Extremism
- Current events

What participants experience

Shifts in attitudes

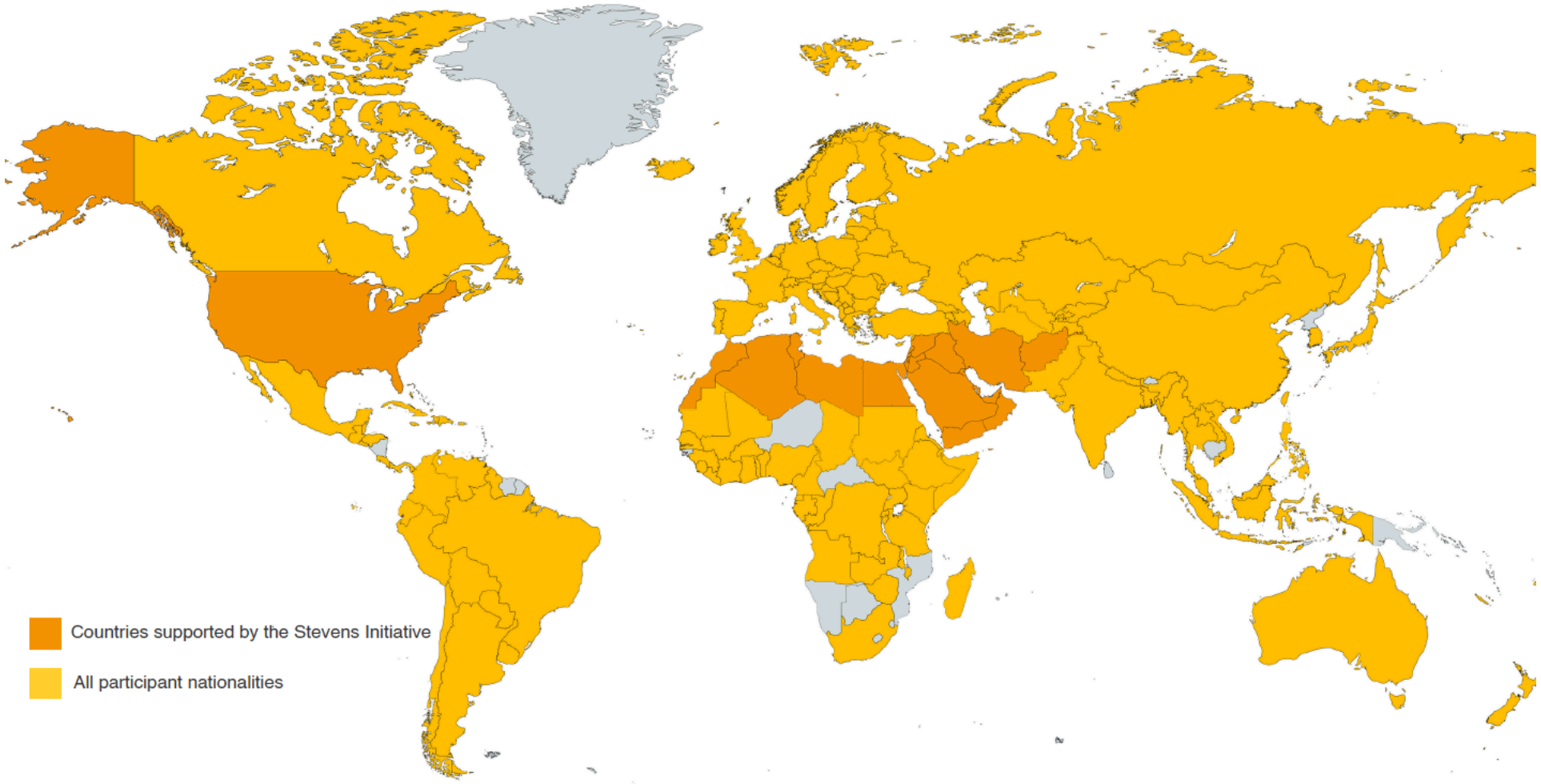
- Building Empathy and understanding of others
- Embedding a sense of belonging to a broader community

Knowledge and skills

- Enabling a broader understanding of global issues
- Active listening, cross-cultural communication and collaboration skills
- Self reflection and critical thinking
- Media literacy skills

Activation

- Building relationships
- Empowering action to promote positive relationships and to fight stereotypes
- Motivating increased civic and political participation


Countries supported by the Stevens Initiative
All participant nationalities

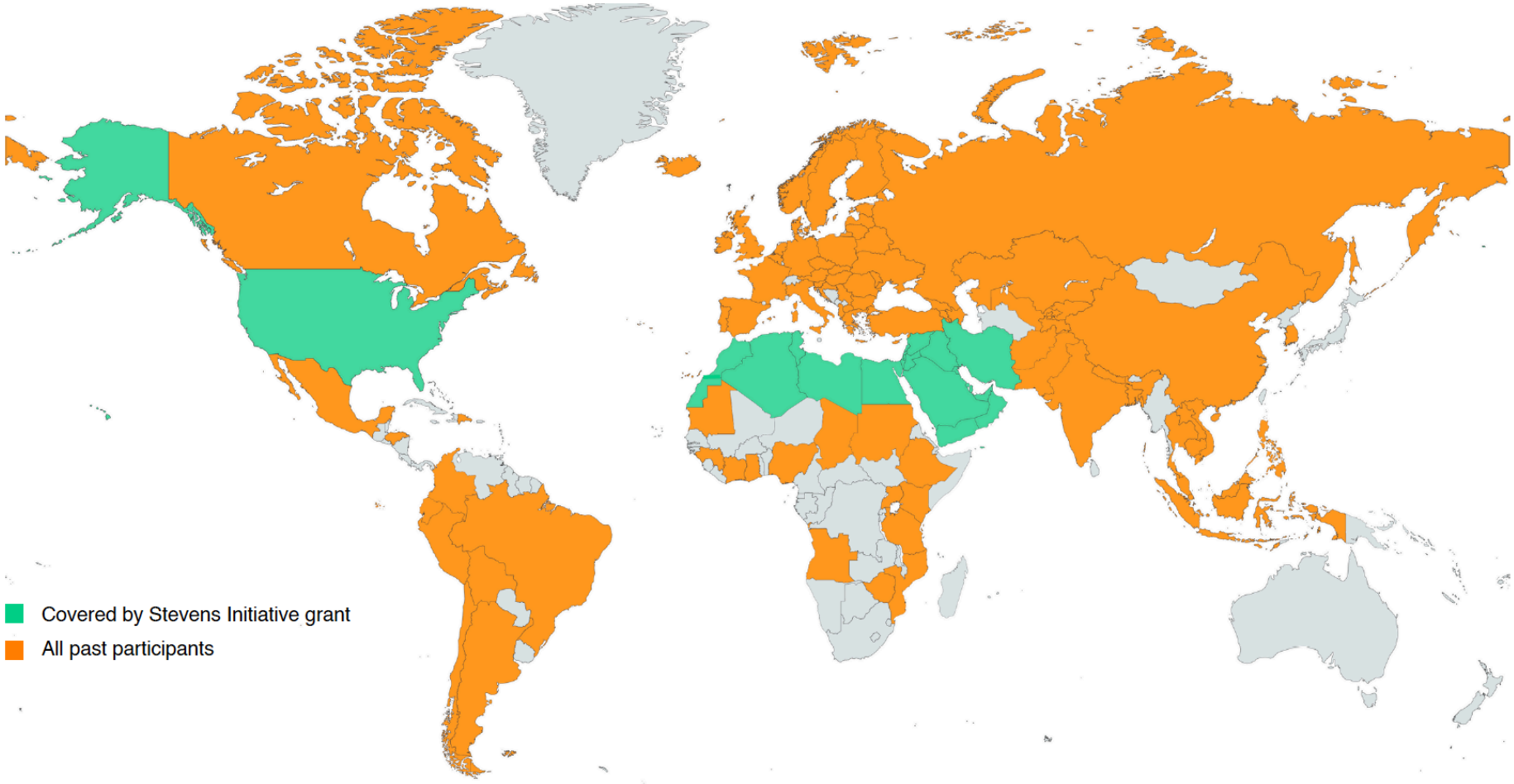
GLOBAL
CIRCLES

Global Circles

- Our open enrolment program – with possibilities for university partnerships
- Short dialogue exchange: 2 weeks of synchronous and asynchronous engagement
- 1 round every month
- Free and open for participation in several rounds
- Bringing together participants from different backgrounds and countries around compelling issues that matter to youth today, such as new geopolitics and shifts in international relations, inequality and discrimination, new technologies and climate change.

Global Circles

- Current topic: Rethinking humanitarian action in a world of crises
- Upcoming topics:
  - Social media: a blessing or a curse?
  - Social change through citizen initiatives
  - Diagnosing and solving global poverty and hunger crises
  - Metaverse and virtual life - implications for our relationships
  - Changes in employment (global, remote, gigs, etc.), creative and digital economies
  - Climate change and biodiversity - should we prevent or adapt?
- Participants learn from and with each other through discussion-based activities.
- Each group has two trained facilitators.
- Combination of structured topics and open discussion.


Covered by Stevens Initiative grant
All past participants

Global Circles

I experienced a feeling I haven't felt before and it shocked me in a good way. Being able to express myself comfortably, knowing that the others were listening actively, and understanding my ideas felt amazing.

Participant ~ Tunisia

The conversations organically evolved as we learned more about each other and our sometimes surprising similarities, all while respecting our cultural differences. We were able to quickly build a meaningful and supportive rapport that helped us through the difficult discussions.

Participant ~ United States

I learned that borders aren't just drawn on maps but in our heads. In order to overcome the real borders that surround us daily, we have to overcome the mental barriers first by challenging stereotypes and talking directly to everyone.

Participant ~ Germany

1ST YEAR
CONNECT™

1st Year Connect

- Focused on one campus
- Designed to equip incoming students with the skills to successfully engage in difficult conversations on controversial topics.
- Can be integrated into an existing orientation program or a required course to connect incoming students from the same college or university.
- Students meet for 8 hours of synchronous online engagement, for instance during the summer or winter break.
- Teachers are also encouraged to train, be part of the program and often end up using this methodology in their class for other activities.
- To date, 1YC has been piloted with over 500 students.

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1st Year Connect

JANUARY 2021 - COMPARATIVE PRE & POST PROGRAM

"I have spoken or acted to promote awareness about an issue related to discrimination."

- **15.53%** increase in students saying they “agree” or “strongly agree”

"I have challenged media misrepresentation of other groups."

- **21.81%** increase in students saying they “agree” or “strongly agree”

"I am confident that I can produce work with people from other backgrounds."

- **8.13%** increase in students saying they “agree” or “strongly agree”

FACILITATION
TRAINING
PROGRAM

Facilitation Training

- 2 courses: basic (10hrs) and advanced (20hrs)
- Heavily focused on practice, feedback and experiential learning
- Pedagogy based on conflict resolution methods

- Learning to:
  - Actively listen, summarize, reformulate
  - Make observations, ask critical thinking questions, model and encourage active listening
  - Nurture perspective giving and taking
  - Be neutral and multi-partial process leaders – not dialogue participants
  - Be comfortable avoid conflict

VIRTUAL
EXCHANGE
SOLUTIONS

Virtual Exchange Solutions

- Custom design programs to fit your organizational needs.
- Dialogue and / or training and / or consulting
- We provide curriculum design, facilitators, coordination, training, and/or advice on how to run your own VE
- We have worked with Intergovernmental Organizations, professional networks, Higher Education Institutions, high schools, and other initiatives focusing on bi-national exchange.
- We have worked in English, French, Arabic

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Since 2002, we have worked with educators from 280 colleges in 37 countries and 31 US states to bring our Dialogue Exchange programming to 38,443 students worldwide, and have trained 6,884 facilitators representing 123 nationalities.

Successes

Sarah Al Qaysi, Connect Program Alumna, American University of Sharjah, Iraq

"I participated in the Connect Program during my first online semester while we were in lockdown. A big chunk of my history course was a part of it. Seeing people from all over the world sharing their lockdown experiences, and knowing that I wasn't alone, was very helpful during a tough time."

"Virtual exchange is very unique because study abroad programs can make one remain focused on oneself. Your environment is different but you remain in your own bubble. This can actually make you more attached to your perspective. If we talk about immigrants, we talk with family and friends who will share similar views. It is different to talk about immigration with immigrants or hear the perspective on immigration from American peers."

Successes

Amal R., Soliya Connect Program Alumna from Tunisia

"It was super interesting to have dialogue sessions with people coming from the U.S. and Libya. I learned about gun control rules in the U.S. for the first time and the challenges Americans face against gun violence," she says.

"I took an interest in conflict resolution and dialogue, and became a trainer for intercultural groups. I realized my passion for volunteering."

"International dialogue is different from our day-to-day conversations and debates."

"There was no censorship or manipulation, unlike social media where this is likely to happen. People were vulnerable and without masks. The focus was on learning; there was cultural context and mutual respect. The facilitators made sure everyone was engaged. They challenged us and guided us with questions."

Successes

Nicole L. , Soliya Connect Program Alumna from Tennessee

"I made a life decision to change my major after participating. Now, as a digital organizer, I assist low-income households in getting access to publicly funded health and food assistance programs."

"It was fascinating to realize how little we are aware of international perspectives and what the policy implications of the decisions our leaders make at home are on other countries."

"Learning how to be an active listener in digital mediums was a major accomplishment for me. Letting myself be quiet for a minute. Prioritizing listening to the stories of other people."

"I learned by experience how it's so difficult to humanize from just textbooks; hearing and sharing personal stories was really interesting and very valuable."

Successes

Rahmah Davis, Connect Program Alumna, Morgan State University

"I always had international curiosity but those opportunities were lacking at Morgan State. It is a predominantly black institution, my peers are black, and there are only a few international students. The Connect Program really filled that void and allowed me to meet with international students around the world."

" In the beginning, internet connection was an issue. Not being able to see or hear them at times was frustrating. But that made me realize that not everyone lives in a country where wifi is accessible everywhere. It put into perspective how people lived and how I lived. I learned to take the time to be patient with my international peers."

- ***"I learned how to be a listener, first, before reacting. As architects or designers, we must be listeners. "***

Measuring Impact

Efficacy is measured and evaluated using pre- and post-program survey tools developed by Dr. Emile Bruneau of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania and formerly of the Saxelab Social Cognitive Neuroscience Laboratory at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Longitudinal impact studies are conducted in coordination with the University of Oxford and University College London.

Measuring Impact

What we measure

Attitudes

- Empathy and cross-cultural understanding
- Respect and Appreciation across difference

21st century skills

- Critical Thinking
- Cross-cultural Communication skills
- Collaborative Problem Solving
- Leadership skills

Measuring Impact

How we measure

Quantitative
- Reach
- Demographics
- Satisfaction across participant groups (NPS)

Qualitative
- Stories of change
- Collaborative Projects

Tools
- Surveys (Pre-Post)
- Self Other Overlap
- Relationship Thermometer
- Control Groups
- Open Feedback loop

Partnerships
- MIT/U Penn
- Oxford University
- University College London

Measuring Impact

Our Findings

- Can virtual intergroup contact approximate physical contact? ✅
- Is virtual exchange symbiotic with physical exchange? ✅
- Can lasting learning be seeded through virtual exchange? ✅

"***Virtual contact is not only an alternative to direct contact; virtual interactions could be used to enhance or maintain the effects of direct contact before or after the initial experience. Soliya's Connect Program illustrates 'virtual contact' as a new effective type of intervention that could dramatically expand the scope and extend the reach of intergroup contact, and achieve broad change in intergroup perceptions and attitudes***."

Dr. Emile Bruneau

THANK YOU!

Stay in touch:

rafael@soliya.net

https://www.facebook.com/soliya.net
https://www.instagram.com/soliya.ve/
https://twitter.com/Soliya
https://www.linkedin.com/company/soliya

HQ

54 West 40th Street, 7th Floor
New York, NY 10018, U.S.

16 Taieb Mhiri Avenue, Apt A2
La Marsa, Tunis, Tunisia

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Adam KING

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Facilitator Experience

- Training
- Networking
- Support

Skills Enrichment

- Ability to act as a unbiased intermediary
- Engaging actively in conflict
- international/domestically applicability

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Impact

- Aiding group dynamics
- Modeling for potential future facilitators
- A truly democratic forum

UTSA

The University of Texas at San Antonio

College for Health, Community and Policy

Gina Amatangelo
Associate Professor of Practice
gina.amatangelo@utsa.edu

https://hcap.utsa.edu

UTSA involvement with Soliya

- Partner since 2017
- Over 200 UTSA students have participated in Soliya Connect
- 4 faculty in 2 departments have implemented the program
  - Public Administration & Policy
  - Communications
- Student feedback has been overwhelmingly positive

UTSA®
The University of Texas at San Antonio
College for Health, Community and Policy

How to integrate Soliya Connect into a class:

- Relationship to course objectives
- Students participate in the Connect program outside of class time
- Soliya is worth 40% of their grade
- Cost sharing

What do students gain from Soliya Connect?

- INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE BUILT IN TO A COURSE
- CURIOSITY
- SKILL & CONFIDENCE DEALING WITH DIFFERENCE VIEWPOINTS AND CULTURES
- LISTENING
- EXPERIENCE SHARING THEIR OWN VIEWS
- LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

What do students gain from Soliya Connect?

Fun

- “best learning experience I’ve ever had”
- “highlight of my week”

Friendship

- Conversation 2 hours per week
- "The best part was the genuine friendship we formed"

Challenges

- Student schedules: meeting their group outside of class time

- Group dynamics:
  - Lack of consistent participation from some group members
  - Participant technical issues

- Emotional arc of participants
  - Hesitance -> confusion -> engagement -> excitement

Impact on the broader campus community

Campus forum

Students carry forward the skills into other classes (and future careers)

Faculty collaboration on broader dialogue and deliberation efforts

Veteran students and Soliya

"Being in the military and going to war I have always had a negative reaction to Middle Easterners. Having *engaged with* students from that side of the world, I have been able to let my guard down and create a friendship with the students."

Skills for STEM majors

"When applying the skills to the health field, I feel that being able to really listen to the patient, hear how they are feeling are essential in asking follow up questions regarding their symptoms and working towards a particular diagnosis."

Skills for students in the legal field (immigration)

"I wanted to let you know that the Soliya program has really helped with my job.

I feel like it has let me have more of an open mind with these kids who are coming from other countries and who tend to experience culture shock.

I have a better understanding of what they have experienced, which lets me build a better relationship with them so that I can better assist them."