

Stevens
Initiative



2020 Survey of the Virtual Exchange Field

Findings from a survey of virtual exchange programs that connect young people in the United States with young people in other countries from fall 2019 through summer 2020.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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ABOUT THE STEVENS INITIATIVE AND THE ASPEN INSTITUTE

The Stevens Initiative is an international effort to build global competence and career readiness skills for young people in the United States and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) by growing and enhancing the field of virtual exchange. Created in 2015 as a lasting tribute to Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens, the Initiative is committed to helping to expand the virtual exchange field through three pillars of work: investing in promising programs, sharing knowledge and resources, and advocating for virtual exchange adoption. The Stevens Initiative has awarded 60 grants and, by summer 2022, will expand its reach to over 43,000 young people in 16 MENA countries and the Palestinian Territories, and in 45 U.S. states, Puerto Rico, one tribal community, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and Washington, D.C. Learn more: <https://www.stevensinitiative.org/>

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Virtual exchange is a teaching or learning method that uses technology to connect people for education and exchange.

Introduction

Virtual exchange is a teaching or learning method that uses technology to connect people for education and exchange. While virtual exchange is becoming more common in a variety of settings, the dynamics of the field have not been adequately studied. Few resources encompass programs that reach young people in primary or secondary education, as well as programs that reach young professionals or young people in higher education. And there are no published figures for the total number of young people who participate in virtual exchange each year. In 2018, the Stevens Initiative estimated the number of young people participating in virtual exchange in all countries was 125,000 by analyzing data from several large programs and estimating the number of participants reached by the many smaller programs that were also active at the time.

The Stevens Initiative conducted the 2020 Survey of the Virtual Exchange Field to document the virtual exchange programs that connected young people in the United States with peers in countries around the world from fall 2019 through summer 2020. Sharing results from the survey will help virtual exchange practitioners, educators, policy makers, and other stakeholders make decisions about future programming. Information about the field will be particularly useful amid the transformation to education and exchange made necessary by the coronavirus pandemic.



Methods

The Stevens Initiative gathered data from virtual exchange implementers through an online survey using the SurveyMonkey platform over a six-week period during August and September 2020. To collect as many responses as possible, the Initiative announced the survey to more than 7,800 of its outreach list subscribers, posted about it on its Facebook and Twitter accounts, and asked peer organizations to further spread the word to their networks. The Initiative gave a template spreadsheet to institutions that administer many virtual exchange programs to allow them to submit data about a large number of programs more easily than submitting data via the online survey form.

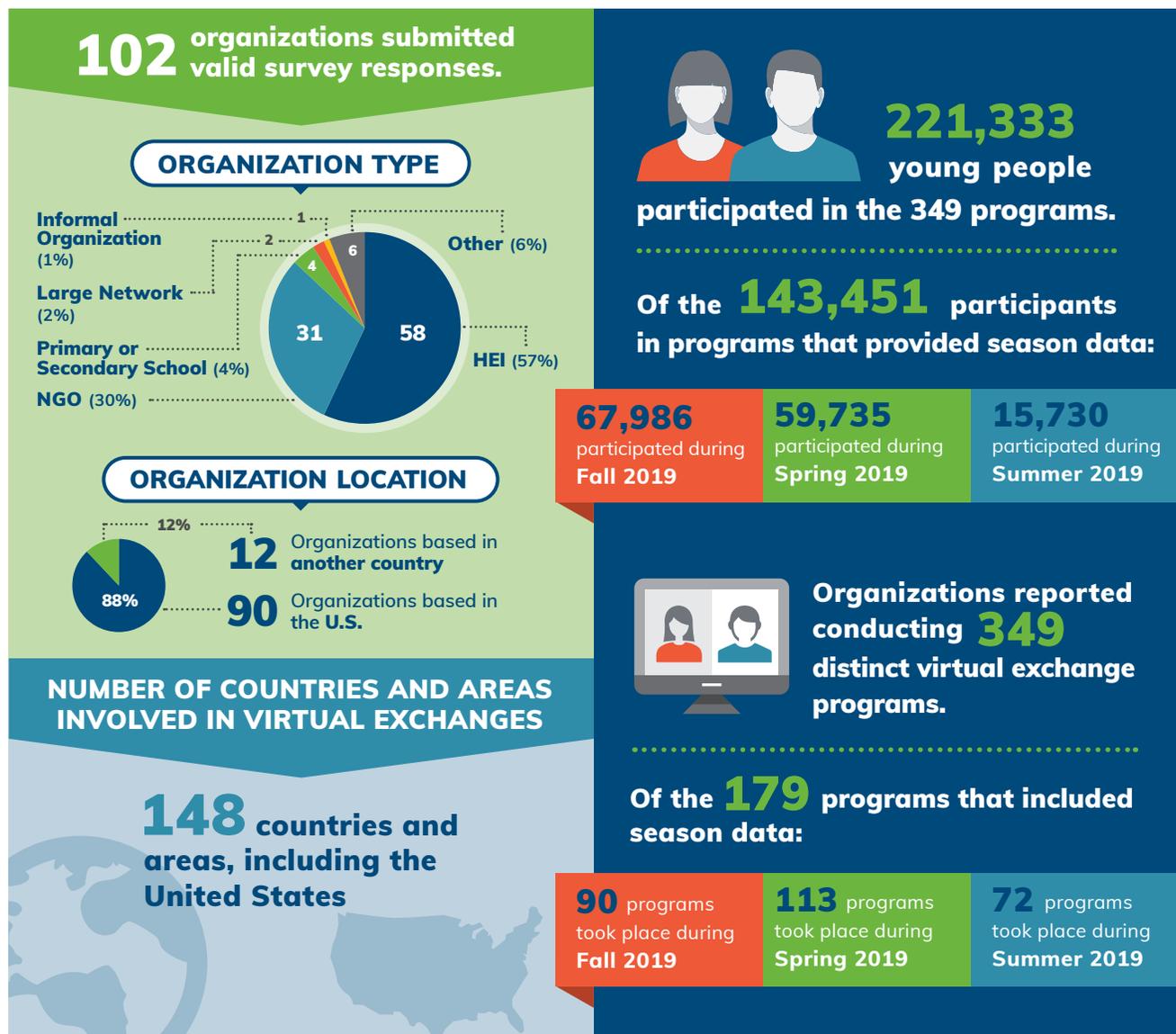
Responses had to satisfy several criteria to be included in the data. The programs needed to be consistent with the definition of virtual exchange as a method that uses technology to connect people for education and exchange. The program had to serve young people at one of the following education levels and/or a corresponding age level: elementary, middle, or high school; undergraduate or graduate education; or young professionals. The Initiative did not provide strict definitions for these categories, deferring to respondents to apply terms as they use them in their own context. The program had to connect young people in the United States with peers in any other country. And the program needed to be conducted during the period from September 1, 2019, through August 31, 2020 (corresponding to fall 2019 through summer 2020 in the United States). Responses that did not meet all these criteria were excluded from the data.

Virtual exchange encompasses a wide variety of education and exchange programs. Respondents provided data that were not always comparable across programs, despite the survey including instructions intended to provide consistent terms or definitions that could apply to all programs. The Initiative took steps to confirm that survey submissions were valid, following up with respondents when submissions were missing key information or were hard to interpret. For example, one respondent listed the number of classrooms that participated in a program rather than the number of individual participants, as requested. The Initiative engaged that respondent, as well as several others whose responses revealed similar concerns, and revised the submission to match the desired data type. The Initiative sought to include survey responses whenever possible, even when they provided incomplete data. We recognize the challenges many organizations face in trying to collect and share consistent data and realize many of them often rely on educators or other facilitators to share information about what happens in their course or classroom.

Results

The Initiative collected valid responses from 102 organizations. These organizations reported conducting 349 virtual exchange programs that met the inclusion criteria. Respondents provided detailed information about 179 of the programs. Data on the other 170 programs were submitted without additional details. Fifty-eight percent of the programs for which we received detailed responses were primarily conducted by higher education institutions (HEIs), and 30% were primarily conducted by non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Eighty-eight-percent of these programs were implemented by organizations based in the United States. Respondents reported a total of 221,333 unique youth participants from September 2019 through August 2020. Respondents who provided data on the countries where participants were located reported connecting young people in the United States with young people in 147 other countries or areas around the world. A list of the organizations included in the survey can be found posted with this report on the Stevens Initiative website.

Survey Response Overview



Note: Some programs were conducted during multiple seasons.

Top 10 Most Frequently Listed Countries in Survey Responses



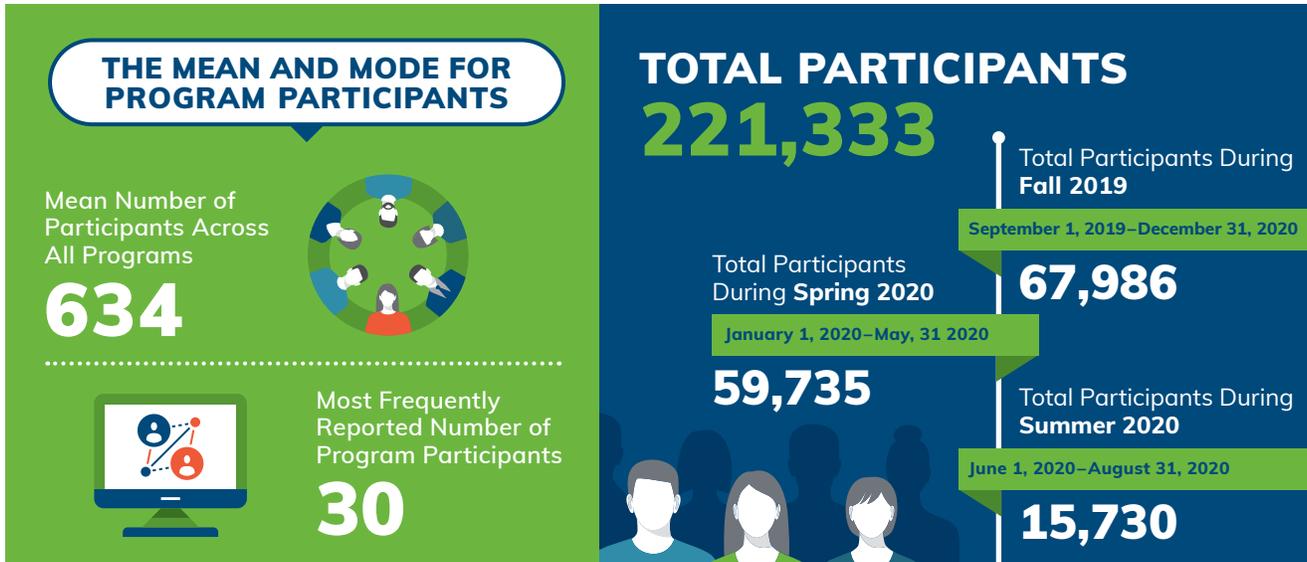
The Initiative sought to not only record the number of virtual exchange programs conducted during this time period and the number of youth participants in those programs, but also to document key program characteristics. Respondents provided varying levels of detail about their programs. The following sections note how many programs out of 349 provided data of each type.

Program Types, Participant Numbers, and Duration

ALL 349 PROGRAMS REPORTED THEIR PROGRAM TYPE	
Programs at a virtual exchange administrative cluster at one institution prioritizing training and support for activities	189
Programs run between two sites	62
Programs run mostly the same way across several sites	39
Programs in which multiple sites conduct related, but varied, activities	31
Open enrollment virtual exchange program where there was no single site hosting participants in person	26
Program type unknown	2

A common difference between virtual exchange programs is the multiple ways individual programs can be structured between sites and with the types of activities they conduct. These design elements are influenced by the institution type, partnerships, virtual exchange activities, and participant demographics. These program types are detailed with examples in the [Stevens Initiative's Virtual Exchange Typology](#). Survey responses indicate that most programs supported, or were administered by, an administrative cluster at one institution that prioritizes training and support for virtual exchange activities. Other common responses included a single exchange between two sites or programs that were run in a similar way over multiple sites.

Participants

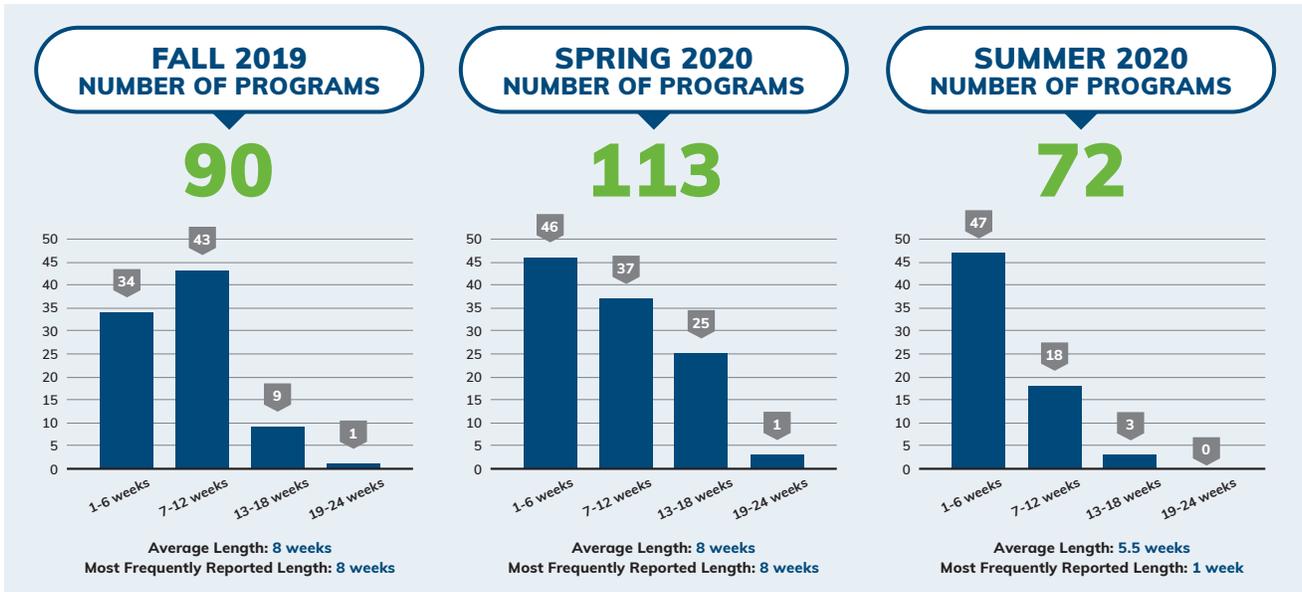


Note: 349 programs were included in this description.

Many programs reported having approximately 30 participants. The average of 630 participants per program was skewed by a few programs that reported reaching thousands of participants. Respondents reported reaching more participants during the periods that fell during the fall and spring terms of U.S. academic semester calendars. Fewer participated in virtual exchanges during the period that fell during the summer in the United States. Participation numbers from spring and summer 2020 may have been impacted by the coronavirus pandemic, though it is unclear how the impact of potential disruptions to programming compares to the potential increases in participation as many organizations began conducting more activities online due to social distancing.



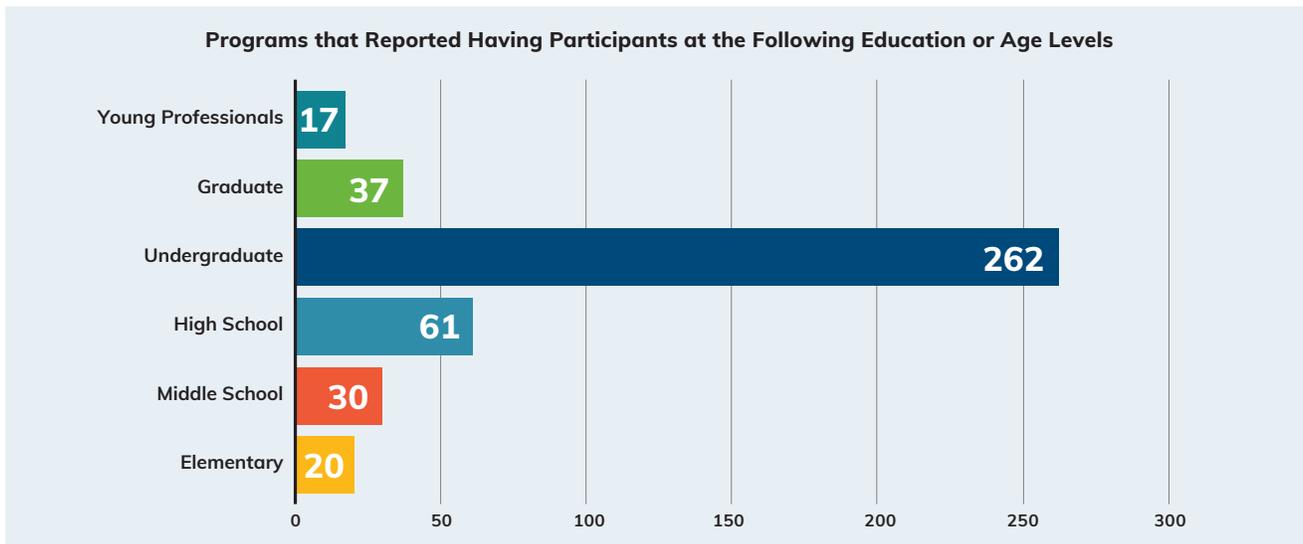
Program Duration



Note: 179 programs provided program duration data. The minimum length possible to report was one week and maximum length possible was 24 weeks.

Programs conducted during the fall and spring in the United States were clustered closely around eight weeks in duration. Programs conducted during the summer were much more varied in duration: the average was about five and a half weeks, but the most common duration was one week. Programs conducted over one to six weeks were more common than programs conducted over 13 or more weeks during all seasons.

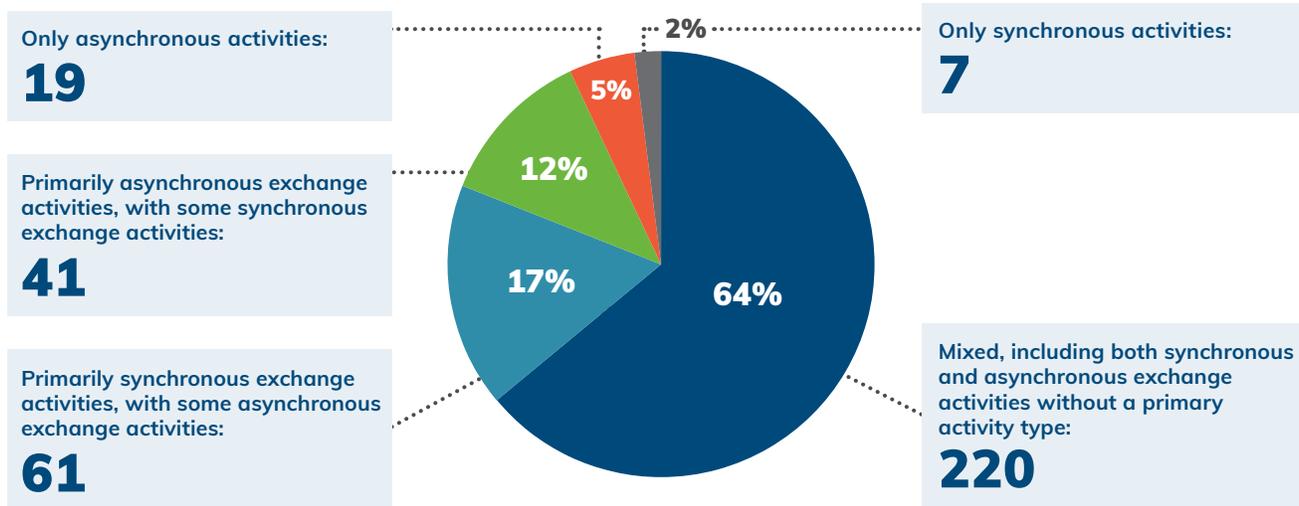
Participant Education or Age Level



Note: All 349 programs provided participant age level data.

Undergraduates were the most commonly mentioned group reached by respondents, which is consistent with the Initiative's observation that virtual exchange is more widely practiced, and often more easily launched, at higher education institutions than at primary or secondary education institutions. Many respondents indicated that their programs included a mix of young people at multiple education or age levels.

Communication Methods



Note: 349 programs were included in this description.

Virtual exchange programs use a variety of communication methods, which can be generally grouped into two clusters: synchronous, or real-time, communication such as videoconference, and asynchronous communication in which participants share messages at different times. Both categories encompass a wide range of activities and applications, and advances in technology usher in near-constant change. Young people might participate in synchronous activities, asynchronous activities, or a mixture of activity types. Respondents indicated the vast majority of programs use multiple communication methods in their exchange activities.

Topic and Content Areas



Note: 179 programs provided data about the primary content or topic.

Respondents were asked to select the primary topic or content areas for their virtual exchange programs from the options represented in the table above. Intercultural Dialogue or Peacebuilding, Civics/Leadership, and Entrepreneurship/Business were the most commonly selected topics among those provided in the list of survey options. Many respondents reported that their programs did not primarily address one of the listed categories. Seventeen percent of programs reported addressing multiple content areas or topics, and 7% of programs answered “Other.”

Discussion

The 221,333 young people reported as participants in virtual exchange over the past year—and the information about the programs in which they participated—create a picture of a field that is broad and varied. The number of participants is substantially higher than the 125,000 participants the Initiative estimated were reached in 2018, particularly when recognizing that the 2018 estimate sought to account for all programs worldwide and not just programs that connected young people in the United States with their peers in other regions as this survey did. Survey results suggest that programs involving young people across all age and education levels in activities focused on a wide range of topics demonstrate that many different communities value virtual exchange.

Analysis of the program attribute data suggests several potentially interesting trends. Average program duration was the same—eight weeks—during the fall and spring seasons, but markedly lower—five and a half weeks—during the summer season. The survey also suggests that, rather than using only synchronous or asynchronous communication methods, nearly all programs—more than 90%—use a mix of the two methods. This information may help program designers as they create or modify virtual exchange activities and curricula in the future. Finally, it is worth noting the broad reach of virtual exchange. Respondents reported connecting young people in the United States with peers in 147 other countries or areas around the world, including many where international travel is limited even under pre-pandemic conditions.

The Initiative recognized from the outset that this survey would face limitations at several stages of the project. Staff capacity constraints led the Initiative to focus on programs that involved participants in the United States, because the Initiative did not have an adequate list of all practitioners outside the United States to collect representative data on a global scale. The Initiative was not able to reach all practitioners in the United States nor to elicit responses from all practitioners who were asked to complete the survey. Many respondents gave answers that were incomplete or did not seem consistent with the intent of the survey questions or the definitions of key terms the Initiative stated in the Typology. This complicated the process of determining whether, and how, several responses could be used. The Initiative chose to make some estimations and inferences in order to use several responses.

Despite these limitations, the survey provides encouraging and thought-provoking evidence about dynamics in the field as practitioners face a period of remarkable upheaval in how technology is used in education and exchange. The Initiative looks forward to working with stakeholders to improve the survey instrument and process at an early stage of preparation for the 2021 survey. Improving consistency across responses will be a high priority. The Initiative plans to broaden the scope of the next survey to include all virtual exchanges, not only those involving participants in the United States, as one among several changes to more fully understand the state of the field.



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