



Virtual Exchange Impact and Learning Report

STEVENS INITIATIVE | 2023



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The impact and learning represented in this report, and the report itself, would not have been possible without the tireless effort of Stevens Initiative grantees and their partners to provide virtual exchange opportunities to thousands of young people in both the United States and the Middle East and North Africa. Gratitude is due to the evaluation team at RTI International for conducting the excellent evaluation and analysis included in this report. Additional thanks are due to multiple members of the Stevens Initiative team for their contributions at several stages of the project.

ABOUT THE STEVENS INITIATIVE AND THE ASPEN INSTITUTE

The Stevens Initiative is an international leader in virtual exchange, which brings young people from diverse places together to collaborate and connect through everyday technology. Created in 2015 as a lasting tribute to Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens, the Initiative invests in virtual exchange programs between the U.S. and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA); shares research, resources, and promising practices to improve impact; and advocates for broader adoption. Through its 91 grants, the Stevens Initiative will expand its reach by summer 2023 to nearly 75,000 young people in 17 MENA countries and the Palestinian Territories, and in 49 U.S. states, Puerto Rico, five tribal communities, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and Washington, D.C. Learn more: <https://www.stevensinitiative.org/>

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2023 Impact and Learning Report

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Dear colleagues,

With great enthusiasm, I introduce the Stevens Initiative's 2023 Virtual Exchange Impact and Learning Report.

Last year marked the 10th anniversary of the passing of Ambassador Stevens. It was a somber time of reflection while we navigated an ever-changing educational landscape and the perception of a wavering desire for virtual exchange. Yet we took this year to reconnect with why we show up every day: the millions of young people who deserve to have a virtual exchange experience.

The Stevens Initiative wants virtual exchange to be a part of every young person's educational journey, and we are working to make this happen. We need more support and engagement across the education, government, civil society, and private sectors. Together, we have a stronger voice to assert virtual exchange as a fundamental building block for broader global understanding.

This report demonstrates that virtual exchange works in all the ways we hope. The programs are diverse in curriculum, geographic reach, age level, and more. But what they have in common is that participants gain critical skills that will help them in the future. The programs we fund show that participants had gains across the domains we care about, including their ability to see from others' perspectives, their cross-cultural communication skills, and how warmly they feel toward people in other places. Data show that virtual exchange makes a difference in a young person's ability to engage with global peers. The William David Institute's rigorous evaluation shows a notable increase in participants' knowledge of other people and places and the degree to which they have something in common with people from the other place. And we've gathered hundreds of anecdotes about virtual exchange's impact on young people and their success. Taken together, these stories and data points illustrate the power of virtual exchange.

This report helps communicate the value of fostering global connections, allowing us to better speak to new audiences. It will inform our grant investments and help grantees, partners, and other practitioners improve their practice. We encourage you to share this report with colleagues and to draw on the lessons learned from it when determining global education and exchange priorities and strategies. Using this report to make the case for virtual exchange in your context can impact the lives of countless young people.

We are approaching 2023 and our eighth year of work with a renewed sense of purpose and energy, focusing on making virtual exchange accessible on a larger scale. Virtual exchange must become part of every young person's formative years and must be included in global education toolkits used by schools, higher education institutions, and nonprofit organizations worldwide. This report reinforces why and makes us eager for our work in the years ahead. Together, we can give every young person the opportunity to participate in this life-changing experience. Join us in this effort and reach out to us at stevensinitiative@aspeninstitute.org to learn how we can work together.



Christine Shiau
Executive Director
The Stevens Initiative

Introduction

This report is the Stevens Initiative’s fourth annual report aimed at sharing data and demonstrating the impact of our virtual exchange programs. Those new to virtual exchange often ask, “What is the impact of these programs?” This report and its previous iterations seek to answer that question by providing specific evidence of the impacts of participating in virtual exchange. This report shares data from the evaluation of our grantee programs, lessons learned from efforts to grow the virtual exchange field, recommendations for effective practice, and examples of impact in the voices of exchange participants. The coronavirus pandemic dramatically impacted the field of international education and exchange, and those effects are still being felt in numerous ways. As in-person exchange and other mobility opportunities become available, this report serves as a reminder that virtual exchange is not a “second best” option for international or cultural learning, but rather a strategic tool to accomplish multiple goals.

2023 REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

- ▶ Consistent with previous years, positive changes can be observed across multiple global competence scales for participants of Stevens Initiative-supported virtual exchanges.
- ▶ In both the MENA region and the U.S., more than 80% of participants responded that they would recommend their virtual exchange program to their peers, demonstrating a satisfaction with virtual exchange despite “zoom fatigue” or other post-pandemic perceptions of virtual learning.
- ▶ In sharing participant demographic information, the Stevens Initiative demonstrates the power of virtual exchange to reach and include communities that are often underrepresented in international learning opportunities.
- ▶ In the release of the second Quasi-Experimental Design research project from the William Davidson Institute at the University of Michigan, readers will note that virtual exchange participants indicated positive gains for several outcomes when compared with peers who did not participate in a similar program.



Evaluation: Summer 2021 and Academic Year 2021-2022

RTI International (RTI) conducts an independent evaluation of the Stevens Initiative's grantee programs. This collaboration, which began in 2016, continues to use a developmental approach to evaluation that provides support to practitioners implementing programs and recognizes the unique needs and challenges of program evaluation across a wide range of settings. This collaboration has been documented in detail in [previous reports](#). As part of the effort to continually improve this evaluation process, the Initiative and RTI worked together on three significant changes this year.

First, RTI adapted the phrasing of some survey questions to improve comprehension for participants at the K-12 level. With this change, effect sizes are now shared separately for postsecondary participants and K-12 participants¹ according to our global competence scales.

Second, during spring 2022, the Initiative shifted to recommending that grantees use only post-program surveys rather than conducting pre- and post-program surveys, reducing the burden of data collection and analysis. The Initiative's post-program survey template includes retrospective questions, which ask participants to think back to before the program started and answer questions about themselves at that time, in addition to answering questions about their current knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Asking young people post program to think back on how they would have answered before participating may more accurately reflect a fuller understanding of how much they really knew or were able to do at the outset, due to a new or evolved understanding of the skill or concept being measured.

Finally, the Initiative added survey questions asking participants to self-report demographic information and feelings of inclusion during their exchanges. These demographic data and feelings of inclusion are detailed below and are discussed later in this report.



1 K-12 participants refers to participants in primary, middle, or secondary school. Postsecondary refers to participants who have completed secondary school. Some grantees used the postsecondary survey measures even though some, or all, of their participants are at the secondary level.

Reach and Institutional Characteristics

During the summer and fall of 2021 and the spring of 2022, 10,898 young people participated in programs supported by the Stevens Initiative: 4,885 participants in 43 U.S. states, Guam, tribal communities, and Washington, DC, and 6,013 participants in 17 countries across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and the Palestinian Territories. In both the United States and in the MENA region, the Stevens Initiative reached secondary (middle school and high school) and postsecondary youth.

Through virtual exchange programming, the Initiative works to increase access to international learning opportunities for young people who might not otherwise have the chance to learn with peers in other countries. As they did during previous reports, RTI continued to collect data about the following institutional characteristics that might suggest students at those institutions may have had fewer opportunities for international exchange compared with students at other institutions.

SUMMER AND FALL 2021: INSTITUTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

		Public Education	Private Education	Unknown
Percentage of participants by type of educational institution attended in each region	U.S. secondary school level	76%	15%	9%
	MENA region secondary school level	64%	15%	21%
	U.S. postsecondary level	86%	13%	1%
	MENA region postsecondary level	56%	29%	15%
		Not English	English	Unknown
Percentage of MENA region participants by primary language of instruction at their educational institution	Secondary school level	65%	18%	17%
	Postsecondary level	66%	25%	9%
Percentage of U.S. participants at the secondary school level who attended Title I schools		Title I	Not Title I	Unknown
		27%	67%	6%
Percentage of U.S. participants at the postsecondary level who attended community colleges		Community College	Not Community College	Unknown
		39%	61%	1%

SPRING 2022: INSTITUTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

		Public Education	Private Education	Unknown
Percentage of participants by type of educational institution attended	U.S. secondary school level	57%	4%	39%
	MENA region secondary school level	20%	37%	43%
	U.S. postsecondary level	84%	15%	1%
	MENA region postsecondary level	65%	20%	15%
		Not English	English	Unknown
Percentage of MENA region participants by primary language of instruction at their educational institution	Secondary school level	82%	0%	18%
	Postsecondary level	69%	24%	7%
Percentage of U.S. participants at the secondary school level who attended Title I schools		Title I	Not Title I	Unknown
		37%	25%	39%
Percentage of U.S. participants at the postsecondary level who attended community colleges		Community College	Not Community College	Unknown or Unaffiliated
		32%	67%	1%

Note: Some categories might add up to more than 100% due to rounding.

To share clearer data, the institutional characteristics in this report also include the percentage of participants for whom the institutional characteristics of the schools and colleges they attend might be unknown. Earlier reports only showed the percentage of participants who were known to attend certain types of institutions (e.g., community colleges). This approach left it unclear if the remaining participants did not attend these educational institutions or if it was unknown what type of institution they attended. Many young people participate in virtual exchange through their educational institutions. Others participate through organizations other than schools (e.g., community centers), and still others join virtual exchanges as individual participants even though they may be enrolled in high school or college. In these last two cases we typically do not have information about the educational institutions they attend (and they are reflected in the “unknown” columns). By sharing the additional data above, we have a better sense of the distribution of Stevens Initiative participants across different types of educational institutions, as well as where gaps remain in the data.

Many participants, but not all, were asked about their prior experience with international exchange. Of those who responded in summer and fall 2021, 65% percent of MENA and 78% of U.S. respondents had not previously participated in an international exchange, whether virtual or in person. In spring 2021, 64% of MENA and 74% of U.S. respondents had not previously participated in an international exchange.

Summer and Fall 2021	No previous experience with international exchange	Previous experience with international exchange
MENA participants	65% (N= 816)	35% (N= 433)
U.S. participants	78% (N= 724)	22% (N= 203)

Spring 2022	No previous experience with international exchange	Previous experience with international exchange
MENA participants	64% (N=1092)	36% (610)
U.S. participants	74% (N=744)	27% (266)

Note: Some categories might add up to more than 100% due to rounding.

Survey Results

Stevens Initiative grantees conduct a survey to measure changes in participants’ global competencies during their participation in their virtual exchange program. The global competence domains in the tables below are evaluated through survey items that have been developed with input from multiple stakeholders over the past several years. These are publicly available on the [Resource Page](#) of the Stevens Initiative website. The Initiative believes these scales and the resulting effect sizes provide an opportunity to examine some of what is gained through participation in virtual exchange. Given the slightly different survey scales for K-12 or postsecondary participants described earlier in this report, the scores for participants from those surveys are presented separately below.

To understand the impact shown in these tables, it is important to keep in mind:

- The numbers expressed below are effect sizes, a measure of the magnitude of change in average survey responses from the pre-program survey to the post-program survey, or comparing the post-program response to the “retrospective” question on the post-program survey.
- Retrospective survey items asked participants on the post-program survey to “think back to before you started [program name]” and assess themselves on that survey scale. Retrospective responses were then compared to the post-program responses to measure change. A positive effect size indicates an increase in that global competence domain, whereas a negative effect size indicates a decrease in that domain.
- Effect sizes of at least 0.2 (20% of a standard deviation), a reasonable threshold for reporting small effects, are highlighted with **bold text**.
- Effect sizes that are statistically significant are marked with an asterisk (*), even if they are smaller than 0.20.

SUMMER AND FALL 2021: EFFECT SIZES AND TOTAL NUMBERS (N) BY REGION

Postsecondary Survey Measures

	MENA	U.S.	All	(N) MENA	(N) U.S.	(N) Total
Knowledge of Other	0.33*	1.15*	0.66*	1136	895	2031
Perspective Taking	0.27*	0.24*	0.26*	1138	908	2046
Perspective Taking – Retrospective	0.45*	0.39*	0.42*	1149	909	2058
Cross-Cultural Communication	0.06	0.20*	0.11	243	127	370
Cross-Cultural Communication – Retrospective	0.50*	0.28*	0.42*	252	133	385
Cross-Cultural Collaboration	0.15*	0.11*	0.13*	984	802	1786
Cross-Cultural Collaboration – Retrospective	0.62*	0.49*	0.57*	981	801	1782
Self-Other Overlap	0.38*	0.65*	0.47*	826	684	1510
Warm Feelings	0.27*	0.20*	0.24*	775	620	1395

K-12 Survey Measures

	MENA	U.S.	All	(N) MENA	(N) U.S.	(N) Total
Knowledge of Other	0.25	1.36*	0.76*	35	40	75
Knowledge of Other – Retrospective	0.36*	0.49*	0.38*	114	22	136
Perspective Taking	-0.08	0.39*	0.16	39	41	80
Perspective Taking – Retrospective	0.41*	0.17*	0.31*	185	152	337
Cross-Cultural Collaboration	0.18	-0.28	-0.08	39	41	80
Cross-Cultural Collaboration – Retrospective	0.55*	0.55*	0.55*	150	62	212
Self-Other Overlap – Retrospective	-0.72*	0.01	-0.20*	38	99	137
Warm Feelings	-0.77*	0.24	-0.26	38	41	79
Warm Feelings – Retrospective	0.21*	0.14	0.20*	113	22	135

SPRING 2022: EFFECT SIZES AND TOTAL NUMBERS (N) BY REGION

Postsecondary Survey Measures

	MENA	U.S.	All	(N) MENA	(N) U.S.	(N) Total
Knowledge of Other	0.25*	0.61*	0.38*	218	102	320
Knowledge of Other – Retrospective	0.27*	0.50*	0.34*	750	334	1084
Perspective Taking	0.15*	0.37*	0.21*	226	109	335
Perspective Taking – Retrospective	0.35*	0.30*	0.33*	1507	851	2358
Cross-Cultural Communication	0.12	0.07	0.10	225	107	332
Cross-Cultural Communication – Retrospective	0.34*	0.18*	0.28*	530	254	784
Cross-Cultural Collaboration	0.05	0.20	0.11	89	49	138
Cross-Cultural Collaboration – Retrospective	0.56*	0.48*	0.53*	997	597	1594
Self-Other Overlap	0.39*	0.82*	0.53*	566	419	985
Self-Other Overlap – Retrospective	0.45*	0.84*	0.55*	308	139	447
Warm Feelings	0.20*	0.28*	0.23*	611	443	1054
Warm Feelings – Retrospective	0.27*	0.24*	0.26*	422	194	616

K-12 Survey Measures

	MENA	U.S.	All	(N) MENA	(N) U.S.	(N) Total
Knowledge of Other	-0.29	0.42	0.07	28	20	48
Knowledge of Other – Retrospective	0.34*	0.67*	0.47*	197	150	347
Perspective Taking	-0.56*	0.16	-0.28	26	20	46
Perspective Taking – Retrospective	0.43*	0.35*	0.39*	306	276	582
Cross-Cultural Communication – Retrospective	0.57*	# ²	0.60*	61	5	66
Cross-Cultural Collaboration	0.0	0.49*	0.21	28	20	48
Cross-Cultural Collaboration – Retrospective	0.72*	0.59*	0.65*	163	182	345
Self-Other Overlap – Retrospective	0.14*	0.15*	0.14*	139	99	238
Warm Feelings – Retrospective	0.29*	0.41*	0.35*	129	145	274

2 Result is suppressed due to sample size less than 20.

Participants were also asked on the post-program survey if they would recommend the program to their peers. The Initiative interprets these responses to gauge participant satisfaction with their experience.

	MENA	U.S.
Percentage of summer and fall 2021 participants who agreed or strongly agreed they would recommend the program to others	88% (N = 1344)	82% (N = 1113)
Percentage of spring 2022 participants who agreed or strongly agreed they would recommend the program to others	89% (N= 1876)	81% (N=1167)

Notable Outcomes

The Stevens Initiative recognized several noteworthy outcomes or changes from the evaluation efforts described above.

- Multiple positive changes across global competence domains:** The Initiative is once again encouraged that participants reported statistically significant positive changes in multiple domains during both time periods and across both educational levels. Particularly noteworthy are the positive effects in the spring 2022 data for postsecondary participants, where almost all domains had increases with effect sizes larger than 0.20 – a reasonable threshold for reporting small effects – and that were also statistically significant. These data indicate that virtual exchange participants experienced gains in global competencies over the course of the programs. The Initiative takes the positive changes across time periods, regions, and age levels as a strong indication that Initiative-sponsored virtual exchange programs are having their intended effect of developing participants’ global competencies.
- Retrospective survey questions:** The effect sizes for retrospective question scales were often at or above the 0.20 level, a threshold for meaningful effects. Retrospective survey items asked participants on the post-program survey to “think back to before you started [program name]” and to then assess themselves on that survey scale.
- K-12 survey measures and occasional negative effects:** Occasionally, survey measures at the K-12 level indicated a negative effect, or a decrease in global competence. When this was observed, it was at the K-12 level and never on a retrospective scale. These results are difficult to interpret, but one important observation is that negative effect sizes were only observed on items where the total number of responses was quite low (less than 40), indicating that they may not be representative of the overall participant experience of the programs.
- High participant satisfaction:** Participant satisfaction has remained consistently high this year, with over 80% of survey responses indicating they agreed or strongly agreed that they would recommend their program to others. This is particularly important as the perceived value of virtual programming is discussed more broadly in the exchange and education fields.

Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Access in Stevens Initiative Evaluation

The Stevens Initiative remains committed to providing international learning opportunities to youth who might not otherwise have access to this type of programming by supporting exchanges that reach traditionally underserved communities. Many in the virtual exchange field point out that common barriers to participating in traditional mobility (in-person exchange) programs are not present in virtual exchange: high cost, access to visas, time away from family or work commitments, interruptions to courses of study, among others. However, not a lot of data have been shared about the demographics and identities of the participants in virtual exchange programs, particularly regarding the representation of minority and underserved communities. In fall 2021, the Stevens Initiative, in collaboration with RTI, included new survey components that would allow participants to voluntarily report certain identity and demographic characteristics and whether they experienced feelings of inclusion in their virtual exchange programs. This effort has been implemented with the goal to better inform the Initiative, its grantees, and other stakeholders about the impact of our programs on different dimensions of diversity, equity, inclusion, and access (DEIA).

The Initiative has previously shared characteristics for institutions of participants in its grantee programs, but this new effort went further in two ways:

1. Individual participants were asked to voluntarily share their identity and demographic characteristics instead of relying on institutional characteristics that might not represent individual participants. This change helps paint a more detailed and accurate picture.
2. Questions about perceptions of inclusion in programs were included to better inform program implementation.

The Initiative took a phased approach to this new dimension of evaluation. In fall 2021, U.S.-based participants were asked demographic questions and both MENA and U.S.-based participants were asked about feelings of inclusion. Many of the domains given to U.S. participants, listed below, are traditional scales used in the U.S. to assess diverse representation and equitable inclusion in educational programming. In spring 2022, MENA-based participants were asked to respond to a different set of questions that had been customized to better assess the inclusion of marginalized communities in the MENA context, where traditional scales used with U.S. participants might not have been relevant or appropriate. These MENA-specific scales were created using feedback from Initiative grantee partners and staff based in the MENA region, who could provide cultural context for these scales.

“This experience had a profound influence on me. It fostered a process of self-examination for me, in which I challenged my assumptions, recognized my personal triggers, and learned to actively listen. It widened my perspective of the world and made me open-minded and predisposed to accept different opinions. As a result, I became more self-aware than ever before.”

— Hanan, Libya, Soliya's Connect Global

Survey Results

FALL 2021 AND SPRING 2022 U.S. PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

U.S. Participants	Fall 2021		Spring 2022	
	%	(N)	%	(N)
Gender				
Female	60%	966	60%	698
Male	37%	597	36%	419
Non-Binary	1%	24	2%	21
I do not wish to respond	2%	26	2%	20
Race/Ethnicity				
American Indian or Alaska Native	0%	1	0%	5
Asian	10%	83	13%	132
Black or African American	18%	150	15%	157
Hispanic or Latino	16%	129	20%	204
Middle Eastern or North African	2%	15	2%	22
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	0%	3	0%	4
White	44%	367	40%	411
Some other race	1%	6	1%	8
Two or more races (not including Hispanic or Latino)	4%	31	6%	61
I do not wish to respond	5%	40	3%	26
Disability Status				
Has a disability	11%	98	9%	93
Does not have a disability	82%	749	87%	900
Prefer not to answer	8%	72	4%	46
Parents' Highest Level of Educational Attainment				
Bachelor's or higher degree	57%	538	57%	555
Less than a bachelor's degree	33%	314	35%	338
I don't know	6%	55	4%	40
Prefer not to answer	4%	38	4%	41

Note: Some categories might add up to more than 100% due to rounding.

SPRING 2022 MENA PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

MENA Participants	Spring 2022	
	%	(N)
MENA Participants: Parents' Highest Level of Educational Attainment		
Bachelor's degree or higher degree	62%	977
Less than a Bachelor's degree	27%	420
I don't know	5%	75
Prefer not to answer	7%	112
MENA Participants: Type of Secondary School Attended/Attending		
Private school that teaches an international curriculum	25%	415
Other	67%	1112
Prefer not to answer	9%	144

Note: Some categories might add up to more than 100% due to rounding.

FALL 2021 PARTICIPANT FEELINGS OF INCLUSION

Inclusion Question	MENA		U.S.	
	%	(N)	%	(N)
Percentage of participants who agreed or strongly agreed when asked...				
"I felt like I could be my true self in the program."	87%	1050	79%	924
"I felt valued by the other young people in the program."	89%	1048	83%	924
"I felt valued by the [facilitator/ educator/teacher/professor] in the program."	92%	1049	85%	915
"I felt like I belonged in the program."	89%	1049	77%	923
"I felt included in all aspects of the program."	87%	1048	82%	923

SPRING 2022 PARTICIPANT FEELINGS OF INCLUSION

Inclusion Question	MENA		U.S.	
	%	(N)	%	(N)
“I felt like I could be my true self in the program.”	81%	1555	79%	948
“I felt valued by the other young people in the program.”	83%	1559	81%	946
“I felt valued by the [facilitator/educator/teacher/professor] in the program.”	89%	1558	85%	951
“I felt like I belonged in the program.”	83%	1555	76%	950
“I felt included in all aspects of the program.”	84%	1554	82%	949

Notable Outcomes

It is important to note that, for a variety of reasons, not all participants who participated in Stevens Initiative-supported virtual exchanges are included in this response. For example, some programs were not able to obtain the necessary approval from their institutions to ask about participant demographics. However, based on the data above, it appears that **virtual exchange programs supported by the Stevens Initiative consistently have large percentages of participants representing identities and communities that are traditionally underserved in international education.** Notable outcomes specifically for U.S. participants include:

- More than half of all respondents (51% in fall 2021 and 58% in spring 2022) identified their race or ethnicity as something other than white.
- 11% of respondents in fall 2021 and 9% in spring 2022 identified as having a disability.
- Over 30% of all respondents (33% in fall 2021 and 35% in spring 2022) identified as having a parent whose highest level of educational attainment is less than a Bachelor’s degree, a common measure of socioeconomic status sometimes referred to as “first generation” students.

Similarly, we noticed positive DEIA outcomes for MENA-based participants, including:

- 27% of respondents identified as having a parent whose highest level of educational attainment is less than a Bachelor’s degree.
- 67% of respondents reported either attending or having attended a secondary school that was not a private institution teaching an international curriculum, an indicator of socioeconomic status across the MENA region.

Quasi-Experimental Design Results: William Davidson Institute at the University of Michigan

During the 2018 grant competition, the Initiative offered supplemental grants for grantees to implement more rigorous impact evaluation using either a randomized controlled trial or a quasi-experimental design (QED). The goal was to use a higher degree of rigor than the Initiative's standard evaluation methods – which don't include comparison or control groups – to measure the effects of the virtual exchange program on participants. Several stakeholders have said that stronger evidence of impact would help them make a stronger case at their institutions for getting involved or investing in virtual exchange. The Initiative gave supplemental grants to two grantees selected during the 2018 competition – [Soliya](#) and the [William Davidson Institute at the University of Michigan](#) (WDI) – to conduct evaluations using a quasi-experimental design during 2020 and 2021, supported by Initiative and RTI staff. WDI's results, detailed below, show that participating in their Business & Culture program had a significant, positive effect on some domains of participants' global competencies. Soliya's QED data was included in [last year's](#) Impact and Learning Report.

Methods

WDI's "Business & Culture: A Virtual Practicum" is a classroom-to-classroom postsecondary program focused on international business cultures, bringing together students from the University of Michigan with students and young adults from partner institutions in Egypt, Lebanon, and Libya. WDI's program design involved approximately 40 hours of student engagement, including approximately 25 hours of synchronous exchange, over the course of 15 weeks. WDI collected pre-program and post-program survey data in spring 2020, fall 2020, spring 2021, and spring 2022 from its program participants (treatment group) and from similar undergraduate students who attended the same institutions as the treatment group but had not participated in the program (comparison group).

RTI evaluated the impact of the WDI program on students by comparing post-program survey outcomes between individuals who did and did not participate in the program. RTI focused on four outcomes: Knowledge of Other, Cross-Cultural Communication, Cross-Cultural Collaboration, and Self-Other Overlap. (Perspective Taking was not included because the survey items for that domain changed during the period of this project, making the data inconsistent.) RTI estimated the program impact for all students. Due to a small sample size, RTI did not estimate the program impact separately by region (MENA or U.S.) or cohort (semester).

Because students were not randomly assigned to treatment and control groups, RTI employed a quasi-experimental analytic approach called inverse probability of treatment weighting to equate participants and comparison group students on available baseline (pre-treatment) demographic characteristics. Baseline equivalence between the treatment and comparison group helps ensure that any differences observed in the post-program survey responses are due to participation in the virtual exchange program and not to pre-existing differences between the two groups. Pre-treatment data included age, gender, region, cohort, and baseline global competencies.

Findings

WDI participants had higher scores in the Knowledge of Other and Self-Other Overlap global competencies in the post-program survey than the comparison group did. This is detailed in the table below. On average, participants scored 1.74 points higher than the comparison group on the post-program survey Knowledge of Other scale (scores ranged from three to 15 among participants) and 0.90 points higher on the Self-Other Overlap item (scores ranged from one to seven among participants). This positive effect of WDI program participation on Knowledge of Other and Self-Other Overlap is statistically significant ($p < .001$). The effect size for both Knowledge of Other (0.75) and Self-Other Overlap (0.55) is substantially meaningful and can be categorized as a “medium” sized effect. WDI did not have a statistically significant or meaningful (in terms of effect size) impact on Cross-Cultural Communication or Cross-Cultural Collaboration. Repeating this evaluation in the future with a larger sample overall, a larger comparison group, and further effort to increase survey item response rates could yield more confidence in the validity and representativeness of the results.

TABLE 1: POST-PROGRAM SURVEY OUTCOME ESTIMATES, OVERALL

	Treatment (N=247)	Comparison (N=86)	Difference	Effect Size (standardized mean difference)
Knowledge of Other	11.78	10.04	1.74***	0.75
Cross-Cultural Communication	25.42	25.04	0.38	0.12
Cross-Cultural Collaboration	17.71	17.47	0.23	0.10
Self-Other Overlap	4.40	3.51	.90***	0.55

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

“This program allowed me to step outside the context of my campus and apply my skills to a community across the globe. I was inspired by the drive and commitment of my teammates, and we continue to support each other and leverage the experience in our academic and professional work, even years after the program ended.”

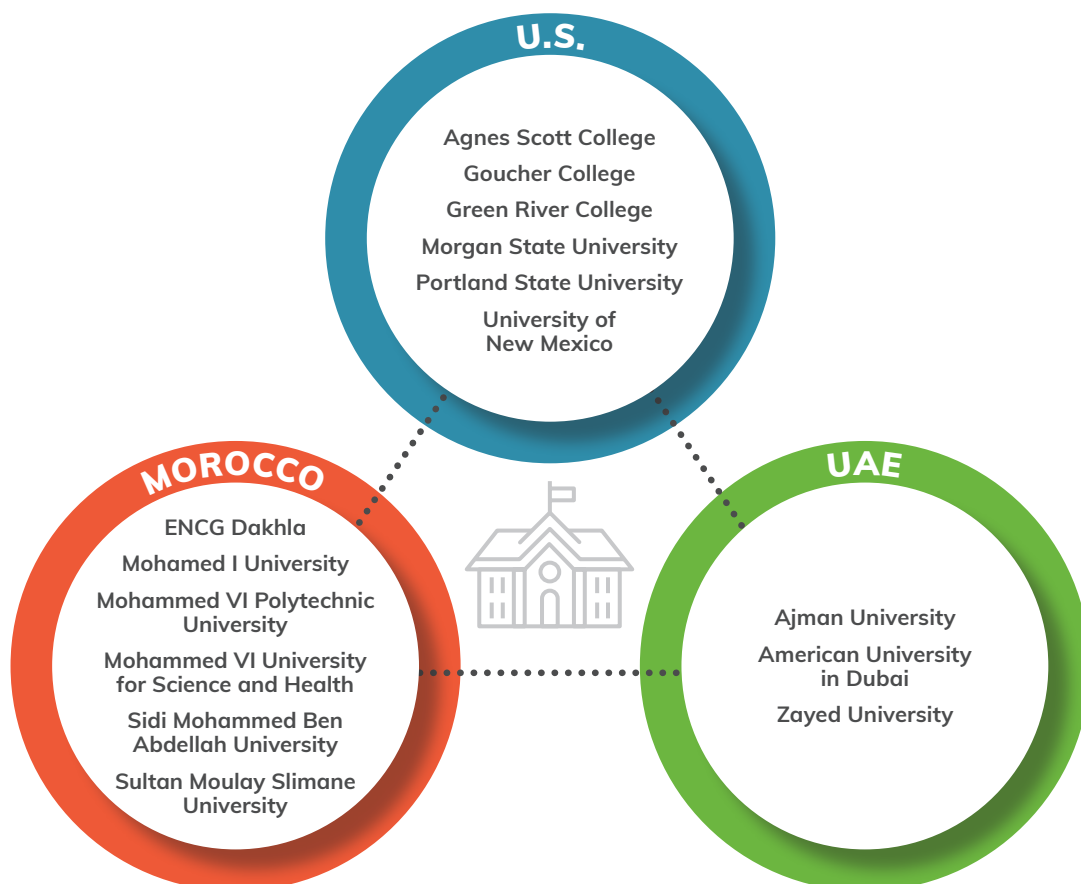
— Jackie, United States, William Davidson Institute at the University of Michigan’s Business & Culture: A Virtual Practicum

Connected Classrooms: Growing Virtual Exchange in Morocco and the United Arab Emirates

Stevens Initiative Connected Classrooms began in 2020 as an effort to grow virtual exchange in Morocco and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) by responding to the unique needs of education stakeholders in these two communities. This unique program works with higher education institutions in Morocco, the UAE, and the U.S. to provide capacity building and coaching, offer institutional support for the growth of virtual exchange, and create a global virtual exchange community. The program offers training for a select number of faculty members, who are matched with an international partner and are trained together in the **COIL method of virtual exchange** through five online workshops provided by a team of expert trainers:

- Workshop 1: Overview on relationship building strategies for students and best practices
- Workshop 2: Focus on building blocks of COIL course design
- Workshop 3: Introduction to key elements of project-based learning
- Workshop 4: Strategies for developing cross-cultural communication skills
- Workshop 5: Working with faculty to refine their collaborative course

To date, the Initiative has had representation from **15** institutions in Connected Classrooms across its first, second, and third cohorts.





Lessons Learned

The Connected Classrooms effort has illuminated key lessons for a variety of stakeholders seeking to grow virtual exchange or build the capacity of their faculty members.

- 1. Partnerships:** The two key elements of a successful partnership are flexibility of partners towards one another and a prioritization of relationship-building. Another indicator of a strong partnership is a mutual interest in, or prioritization of, cultural exchange.
- 2. Varying results:** The same capacity building program can be run at several institutions and the rate of uptake or level of growth of virtual exchange at each institution can differ. This is dependent on whether there is a pre-existing infrastructure on campus for such programs, how much institutions are prioritizing and supporting a program, and the level of effort given to the program internally.
- 3. Managing faculty expectations:** To better manage expectations, it is important to proactively and clearly explain to faculty members the workload involved in these capacity building programs from the very beginning. This should include the effort involved in the training, design, and implementation components of the program.
- 4. Acknowledgement and support:** It is vital for leadership at universities to acknowledge and recognize the amount of effort that goes into running a virtual exchange program and to offer appropriate incentives to increase faculty participation.

A self-sustaining future: The vision for Connected Classrooms is for virtual exchange to be self-sustaining at a select number of institutions, which will allow the program to evolve independently from the Initiative. These institutions are currently receiving support to help them internalize the faculty training and capacity building required for virtual exchange. This will enable them to lead their own faculty training workshops in the future.

“[My virtual exchange program] allowed me to learn more about different cultures and values. But most importantly, it [taught] me that no matter where we’re from, we can always find things in common... we’re not [as] different as we tend to think.”

— Syrine, Tunisia, Stevens Initiative Connected Classrooms

2023 Update: Effective Practices and Common Challenges in Virtual Exchange

This section is a supplement to the lists of common challenges and effective practices for virtual exchange implementation shared in the [2019](#), [2020](#), and [2022](#) Virtual Exchange Impact and Learning Reports. The summary of challenges detailed below was gathered from conversations between Initiative staff members and grantees and practitioners, as well as from observations from RTI's site visits. These visits included observing activities, interviewing key stakeholders such as administrators and facilitators, and conducting focus groups with participants. They may not be applicable to all programs or contexts.

Virtual Exchange Challenges in 2022

While common virtual exchange implementation challenges, such as technology disruptions and logistics, remain perennial issues, the field has continued to be particularly challenged by the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. Despite much of the world beginning to reopen in 2022, the pandemic's lingering effects continued to pose new challenges, and to exacerbate existing challenges, to implementing virtual exchange. While many educational institutions returned to in-person instruction, virtual exchange practitioners have cited **teacher shortages across K-12 education, educators and faculty being overstretched, and pressure to make up for lost in-class instruction time and lost learning** as impediments to implementing and expanding virtual exchange programs. Many practitioners also cited **educators and faculty being burned out** as leading to less interest in incorporating virtual exchange into their courses.

The term "Zoom fatigue" has become part of popular lexicon over the last year, and practitioners across diverse virtual exchange programs have observed **educators and youth participants feeling fatigued or less interested in using online engagement tools after two years of almost exclusively online interaction and education**. Many exchange organizations and educational institutions, in addition to young people themselves, have re-oriented to once again focus on in-person education and exchange opportunities, viewing virtual exchange programming as a trade-off to in-person exchange programming. While these two very different ways of engaging youth do not need to live in competition with one another – and could, in fact, serve as complements to one another – this perception has partially contributed to lower rates of enrollment and retention in virtual exchange programs across nearly all programs supported by the Stevens Initiative. This is particularly true for programs that require educators or faculty to add virtual exchange components into their existing courses. Many practitioners have had to reconsider virtual exchange program models that reduce the burden on educators, which, in turn, adds additional burden on the implementing organization, or on other parties, to properly oversee or facilitate the program.

"When I read others' stories, I [learned] new ideas and new views, and I started to see life with a new vision. I began to love life more than before, because I discovered that others resemble me."

— **Nesrin, Morocco, Global Nomads Group's Student to World**

To assert that interest in virtual exchange has declined universally is not accurate, however. Many practitioners mentioned this year that the demand for virtual exchange among parents, teachers, faculty members, and youth remains consistent with demand in previous years. These practitioners mention that the predominant challenge to virtual exchange is constrained resources. As organizations pivot away from virtual exchange, practitioners have cited that the resources available to support virtual exchange implementation have waned, leaving little incentive or space for nonprofit organizations and educational institutions to implement or grow virtual exchange programming. Directly, this may mean shrinking budgets for virtual exchange programming or support (including the technology that makes virtual exchange possible) and fewer donors supporting virtual exchange programming. Indirectly, this may mean canceled courses or after-school clubs and less available staff time to devote to virtual exchange programming. **Virtual exchange at community colleges has been disproportionately affected, as community colleges face low enrollment and budget cuts.** Young people across the United States and the world have struggled to access the technology that makes virtual exchange possible, and while the return to in-person instruction and gatherings has helped improve this access in some contexts, strained resources to support technology access hampers their ability to easily access and participate in virtual exchange.

Effective Practices

Working with stakeholders to (re)define the value proposition for virtual exchange programming increases uptake of virtual exchange by both institutions and participants.

The value proposition of a given program is unique to its specific context, and the value proposition should be flexible without being entirely inconsistent. During the height of the pandemic, virtual exchange was a way to connect with peers safely at a time when many were isolated at home. As people grow wary of online engagement, the value of virtual exchange may better be communicated in different ways: maybe it is more compelling to position virtual exchange as an opportunity to bring the world to a classroom. It may be an innovative and accessible way to achieve necessary social and emotional learning goals in schools. The value proposition of a program may also be framed to focus on the incentives to join and complete the program. It's important to work with partners to determine how to best talk about and incentivize virtual exchange for all participants and stakeholders.



Investing in thoughtful marketing and advertising of virtual exchange programs is critical for participant recruitment. University courses or schools offering elective classes and clubs that incorporate virtual exchange elements should advertise the opportunity in course catalogs. Several virtual exchange participants mentioned during interviews this year that they did not know their course included virtual exchange until they joined the course and that had they known about the opportunity, they and their peers would have been more excited to sign up. Practitioners should work with partners to determine the best mechanisms (course catalogs, paid advertisements on social media, communications campaigns, ambassadors, etc.) and ways (testimonials, quantitative data, incentives, etc.) to market and advertise virtual exchange to the target stakeholders involved in each program.

Identifying intentional ways to involve participants will help them feel included and will help them remain engaged throughout the duration of the program. Virtual exchange implementers should work with partners and participants at the beginning of a program to define norms and expectations for participation and for inclusive behavior. This can help to address a common challenge of participants dropping out of a program after becoming frustrated by not having a clear enough sense of what is expected of them. One practitioner interviewed by RTI mentioned that facilitators in their program greet each participant by name during synchronous meetings, which served as a small but meaningful practice to ensure participants feel that they, as individuals, are important to the program. Practitioners should also survey participants to gauge whether they feel valued and included in the program and should incorporate suggestions into future iterations of programming.

Dedicating the appropriate resources to support virtual exchange participants and facilitators can help ensure the longevity of virtual exchange programs at the institutional level. Supporting virtual exchange-related professional development opportunities for faculty, staff, and teachers – and creating enough time for these individuals to implement the program without being overstretched – can help to meet the continued desire for virtual exchange and ensure its longevity. Supporting participants' technology needs by providing mobile minutes or data, access to a computer lab, Zoom accounts, etc. helps to minimize disruptions caused by technological failure and keeps virtual exchange participants engaged throughout the program. Paying to translate curricular materials or to add translated captioning to videos or include live interpretation during synchronous sessions helps both to create a more equitable environment for virtual exchange participants, as well as an accessible environment, both of which can help virtual exchange programs grow.

“The Experiment Digital wasn’t just about the activities that you do, but it was about making connections with new friends all over the globe. It was a chance I hadn’t had in my 17 years in my community. It feels like my life was waiting for this experience. It was like the door was closed and The Experiment Digital came to open it for me.”

— Ahmed, Tunisia, World Learning’s The Experiment Digital

In Their Own Words: Impact from Youth Voices

Anecdotes from participants and alumni add a human-centered angle that highlights the impact of virtual exchange programs in ways that statistics often fail to capture. Hearing directly from young people reveals the more personal outcomes of programs, providing a closer look at how a person's life has been touched by the power of virtual exchange. Firsthand accounts of how young people have developed cross-cultural collaboration skills, a deeper understanding of others, an ability to step back and view things from a diverse perspective, and other key global competencies complement the quantitative data represented in other sections of this report.

Knowledge of Other



The biggest thing that I've learned is that I don't have to judge people unless I know them. I had stereotypes about American people, but I learned that they are good people and very respectful. They care about you, they care about your future and their own, and they care about being productive in their communities.

— AHMED, YEMEN, AMIDEAST'S QISASNA, SOLIYA'S GLOBAL CIRCLES, WORLD LEARNING'S THE EXPERIMENT DIGITAL



Virtual exchange programs can help us change our ways of thinking about people from other countries. In fact, they get us to believe that no matter how far we are from each other, we are still very similar, and we can connect easily. Even though we might have different backgrounds, different cultures, and different mindsets, we have a lot of mutual interests and matters. [Through virtual] exchange programs, we understand the similarities [of others] and see how close we can get despite the distance.

— FARES, TUNISIA, SOLIYA'S CONNECT GLOBAL



Perspective Taking



Global Solutions was truly an eye-opening experience and my gateway to a whole new perspective of the world. My participation in virtual exchange allowed me to communicate and make connections with people abroad and see their way of working and thinking. We were able to work together even though we are from different continents, collaborating as a team on an international level.

— SARWAR, IRAQ, IREX'S GLOBAL SOLUTIONS SUSTAINABILITY CHALLENGE



I think the moment for me that changed the whole experience of this program was the ability to meet new people. This helped expand my perspective and the way that I looked at things. I was able to see each problem from a new set of eyes. It provided me with the opportunity to explore new international perspectives on current global issues and problems.

— A., UNITED STATES, HASHEMITE UNIVERSITY'S RESEARCH, EDUCATION AND ADVOCACY FOR COMMUNITY HEALTH

Cross-Cultural Collaboration



Virtual exchange is a huge opportunity for cross-cultural discussions and more understanding between youth all around the world. It was the first time for me to feel that level of understanding and the discussions are so revolutionary. I feel it is crucial for youth in MENA and the U.S. to have this experience, because it will definitely create a more peaceful future for everyone on this planet.

— ABDELKHALIK, PALESTINIAN TERRITORIES, WORLD LEARNING'S NEXTGEN CODERS NETWORK



I have always wanted to visit other countries and learn about other cultures, but I have not really been able to travel to any foreign countries yet. However, with the Qisasna program, I was able to do just this—but very easily and conveniently from my own room! I was able to interact with my Yemeni peers, gain a better understanding of their culture, and work with them on a shared project—all of which I really enjoyed and found meaningful.

— SARAH, UNITED STATES, AMIDEAST'S QISASNA

Self-Other Overlap



Coming into The Experiment Digital, I wasn't as great at making those person-to-person connections with people that were different from me. I had to completely learn from scratch how to communicate and bring up meaningful conversations with people that have completely different lived experiences than me. That has been transformative of my understanding of myself, because it's allowed me to see the world in a far more vivid way and be able to see my own place in it.

— NICOLE, UNITED STATES, WORLD LEARNING'S THE EXPERIMENT DIGITAL



Because of this ongoing dialogue with my friends from across the world, I have come to understand more about my own biases and the factors that drive them so that I can avoid repeating them. By learning more about myself, I am able to understand more about others.

— ALFA, UNITED ARAB EMIRATES, AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF RAS AL KHAIMAH'S ACT: DEVELOPING EMPATHETIC LEADERSHIP

Warm Feelings



[Virtual exchange] helped me understand how to interact with people better, whether in leadership or individual roles... I found myself enjoying the time we spent together and sometimes just having a laugh together while doing the work. I found that to be very enjoyable just to have fun.


— BAKR, IRAQ, WORLDDENVER'S WORLD AFFAIRS CHALLENGE VIRTUAL EXCHANGE



The experience has been so transformative for me. We have become a small family unit over the past five weeks, and I am going to miss everyone dearly. I believe this program effectively helps students to use empathy, teamwork, and compassion to solve many problems that the world is facing.


— PARTICIPANT, UNITED STATES, IREX'S GLOBAL SOLUTIONS SUSTAINABILITY CHALLENGE

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