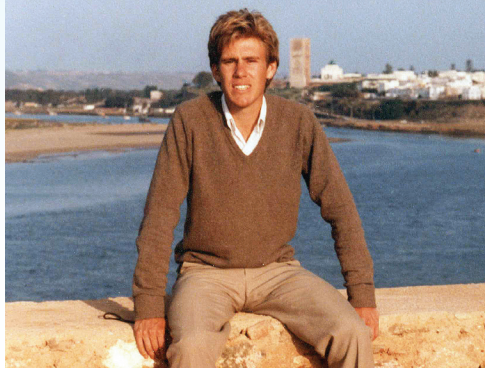THE ASPEN INSTITUTE

Stevens
Initiative

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"Chris believed in the value of each person's story. The Stevens Initiative honors his legacy by tapping into the power of technology to foster meaningful connections and shared respect and understanding between young people in the United States and the Middle East and North Africa. This is the work that Chris believed in, and would have wanted to continue."

– Dr. Anne Stevens, Professor, Seattle Children's Hospital, University of Washington and Sister of Ambassador Chris Stevens

VISION

The Stevens Initiative gives young people the knowledge, skills, and experiences they need to prosper in an interconnected world.

MISSION

The Stevens Initiative is an international effort to build global competence for young people in the United States and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) by growing and enhancing the field of virtual exchange: online, international, and collaborative learning.

INSPIRATION

Ambassador Chris Stevens was known for goodwill toward others. Ambassador Stevens studied in Europe and Spain during high school and college, and served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Morocco, all experiences that shaped his view of the world, fueled his curiosity, and prepared him to be a diplomat who earned the esteem of people wherever he served.

The Stevens Initiative—conceived and developed in close partnership with Ambassador Stevens's family and based at the Aspen Institute—aims to make similar experiences available to an unprecedented number of young people through programs that connect youth in the United States and the Middle East and North Africa virtually in sustained and meaningful ways.

WHAT IS VIRTUAL EXCHANGE?

Virtual Exchange is an educational tool that utilizes online technology to connect individuals and small groups around the world; is based on a curriculum and involves qualified facilitators (educators or others); and involves sustained communication and collaboration in real-time or asynchronously over a period of time. Virtual exchange can facilitate a cross-cultural experience that builds marketable global competencies – including communication, collaboration, empathy, language, and problem-solving skills – and deepens understanding of and ability to engage with people from other backgrounds.

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WHAT DOES THE STEVENS INITIATIVE DO?

1. **Grant Making and Capacity Building**

   The most direct method by which the Stevens Initiative supports the growth of the virtual exchange field is through grants to organizations to administer virtual exchange programs. Through open competitions, the Initiative identifies opportunities to invest in virtual exchange programs. The Stevens Initiative announced 10 grants in 2016, reaching approximately 17,000 young people and training over 1,000 educators/facilitators. Some of those organizations started new programs based on their experience with exchange and education; others expanded their existing virtual exchange programs. The Initiative announced an additional 12 grants in 2017, reaching an additional 10,000 young people. The Stevens Initiative hosts webinars, online meetings, and other events to train and promote knowledge sharing among practitioners.

2. **Monitoring and Evaluation**

   Evaluation is essential for informed investment, and for this reason, the Initiative is working with an external evaluator to monitor and evaluate the work of the Stevens Initiative and its grantees. The lessons learned from evaluation will greatly contribute to the Initiative's understanding of what constitutes and what contributes to quality virtual exchange, informing the design of future competitions and the Initiative's recommendations for best practices.

3. **Research**

   The Initiative is identifying evidence gaps in the field of virtual exchange and will conduct research to fill those gaps so that the impact of virtual exchange programs can be better understood.

4. **Communications**

   The Initiative shares impact and success stories to spread awareness of virtual exchange among students, teachers, parents, education leaders, policymakers, and business leaders in the United States and across the MENA region.

5. **Advocacy and Partnerships**

   The Initiative is working to build awareness and scale the use of virtual exchange across communities in the U.S. and the MENA region. In order to do so, the Initiative is developing a shared understanding of the overarching mission and goals of virtual exchange, and pursues partnerships to further its reach and impact. Through partnerships, the Initiative also matches organizations in each of these regions with peers to expand virtual exchange programs globally.

STEVENS INITIATIVE GRANTS ARE REACHING YOUNG PEOPLE IN 19 COUNTRIES IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA AND 40 U.S. STATES.

COHORT 2 AWARDED IN 2017

1. **Al-Quds University's Palestinian-American Youth Civic Engagement (PAYCE)** program brings together Palestinian and American university students through a shared curriculum to inspire productive, effective, and positive civic engagement. Students produce podcasts on civic engagement in their communities.

2. **An-Najah National University's Green Futures Exchange** spreads awareness of green and sustainable building, expanding the capacity of young people to develop sustainable building practices and create cross-cultural relationships in Palestinian Territories and in Arizona.

3. **Arizona State University** connects high school girls in Phoenix, Arizona, with their peers in Cairo to enhance their knowledge of science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM); problem-solving; collaboration; and leadership.

4. **Ball State University** connects American and Iraqi college students who collaborate to complete STEM project.

5. **The Institute of International Education's Harnessing Innovation through Virtual Exchange (HIVE)** program uses virtual exchange between university students across the Middle East and North Africa and the United States. Students build collaboration and communication skills, intercultural understanding, and civic and global engagement through collaborative projects in courses ranging from environmental health to engineering.

6. In **IREX's Global Solutions** program, post-secondary students from the United States and Jordan team up to address global challenges in the hospitality field. Bi-national teams collaborate to make presentations at a virtual solutions fair and outstanding teams will present their solution at an in-person summit in Washington, DC.

"I never thought I would be able to communicate with international students...I learned we are all human, despite the differences in languages and faiths."

– Abdul Aziz, University Student, Jordan

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7. **Johns Hopkins University's Center for Bioengineering Innovation and Design (CBID)** uses the immersive Portals platform to connect students from a range of disciplines in Baltimore, Gaza, and Beirut to develop innovative, low-cost healthcare solutions. Through hackathons, students learn how to design tools and medical devices that address a public health issue during a humanitarian crisis.

8. **Karam Foundation's Innovating Across Boundaries** program connects young Americans with young Syrians at the Karam House, a refugee community center in Turkey. The program builds STEM skills and cross-cultural awareness through coding and robotics courses.

9. **Sister Cities International's Special Education and Virtual Learning in the United States and Palestinian Territories (SEVLUP)** program implements two virtual exchanges between youth who are deaf, hard of hearing, or require special needs education. In one track, secondary school students collaborate to create an American Sign Language - Palestinian Sign Language video dictionary. In the other, special education teachers are trained to implement virtual exchanges connecting special needs classrooms.

10. **University of Nebraska-Lincoln's Global Virtual Project** fosters cross-cultural engagement between university students in Nebraska and their peers at partner institutions in Oman, Jordan, and the United Arab Emirates, through virtual exchanges, or "global classrooms."

11. **WGBH Education Foundation's Design Squad Global (DSG) Clubs** adds virtual exchange activities to an after-school program that gives kids, ages 10-13, the opportunity to build engineering and global competency skills.

12. **The William Davidson Institute at the University of Michigan's M²GATE** program connects university students from Michigan and across the Middle East and North Africa to develop social entrepreneurship group projects using online resources and virtual exchange.

COHORT 1 AWARDED IN 2016

The first ten organizations that received Initiative grants reached 17,000 students across the two regions. Below is a brief snapshot of their work.

1. **Global Nomads Group (GNG)** integrated virtual reality video into a curriculum designed to spur young people's thinking on global citizenship. It will reach students in California, Utah, Kentucky, New York, Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia. GNG will continue building on the grant received in 2016.

2. Primarily through teacher training, **iEARN** enabled middle and high school students in the United States and across the Middle East and North Africa to work together on issues as diverse as the environment, civic education, heritage and tradition, food security, and the arts.

3. **The National Democratic Institute** augmented an online course with a special track that offers hands-on mentorship for small international groups developing "civic technology" projects.

4. **Soliya** connected post-secondary students in small groups for a semester-long dialogue to foster cross-cultural understanding.

5. **U.C. Berkeley** provided an opportunity, via vlog and virtual meeting environments, for Berkeley undergraduates to interact with a diverse group of peers across the Middle East and North Africa in university courses and Arabic, English, and Kurdish language practice. This program is continuing.

6. **The State University of New York COIL Center** developed and supported sustainable, campus-based exchange initiatives connecting SUNY campuses with universities in Egypt, Lebanon, and Morocco.

7. **Wofford College** scaled up a pilot virtual exchange program with Lebanon and Egypt, integrating it across disciplines.

8. Through a project run by **Chicago Sister Cities International,** high school students in Chicago and Casablanca worked together to create an exhibit for an online science museum. This program is continuing.

9. **World Learning** connected Iraqi and American youth to explore leadership development, civic rights and responsibilities, diversity, community engagement, and other social issues.

10. **Eurasia Foundation** designed a video game that challenged young people to work together internationally to learn about other cultures through puzzles.

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