Virtual Exchange Impact and Learning Report

STEVENS INITIATIVE | 2020

Stevens Initiative

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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/**

The Aspen Institute is a global nonprofit organization committed to realizing a free, just, and equitable society. Founded in 1949, the Institute drives change through dialogue, leadership, and action to help solve the most important challenges facing the United States and the world. Headquartered in Washington, DC, the Institute has a campus in Aspen, Colorado, and an international network of partners. Learn more: **https://www.aspeninstitute.org/**

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EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR LETTER

Dear colleagues,

The Stevens Initiative is pleased to share the latest Virtual Exchange Impact and Learning Report covering the work of our grantee programs from the summer of 2019 through the spring of 2020.
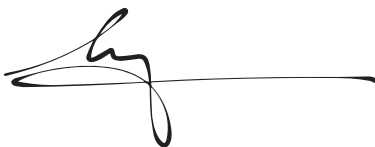
During this time, we've seen continued growth and sophistication in the practice of virtual exchange in many disciplines and settings. More practitioners are building infrastructure on their campuses and honing their methods. This was also a peculiar time, as part of our period for measurement was impacted by the coronavirus pandemic, which upended all aspects of our lives and had a mixed impact on our grantees' programs.

In this report, we celebrate participants' increases in many global competency domains across both time periods reported (summer/fall 2019 and spring 2020), including some larger effect sizes and positive trends along scales that had not previously shown either positive or meaningful effects when compared to findings published in 2019. While the pandemic impacted our partners and the young people they serve, it pushed many to modify programs for a new reality of learning at home. Amid the disruption, the gains across competencies are encouraging. In many cases, programs had to decrease participants' contact or activity time as they adapted to the new dynamics of learning at home during the pandemic. Yet increases in competencies were still present, giving hope that a lower "dosage" of virtual exchange can still make an impact. A large majority of participants said they would recommend the program to others, which is a positive marker for student engagement.

While we may not know when the pandemic will end, we do know that young people continue to have a basic human need for connection. More than ever, it is important that our youth— as agents of change—are globally competent, able to navigate the world's events and make sense of the implications for their communities. We have worked closely with our grantees, external evaluators, and others across the field to continue learning about effective practices to overcome common challenges, growing a community a practice at a time when so many people are motivated to use technology to communicate across distances great and small.

As always, we invite your thoughts and feedback and hope you will let us know how we can support your work. Should you have any further questions or comments, please reach out at **stevensinitiative@aspeninstitute.org**.

Be well,

Mohamed Abdel-Kader
Executive Director
The Stevens Initiative

Introduction

This is the Stevens Initiative's second annual report that shares evaluation data, lessons learned, and recommendations from recent grantee programs on how to overcome common challenges. The Initiative serves as a hub for research and knowledge-sharing that practitioners across the field can use as they design, adapt, and conduct virtual exchange programs. Amid the coronavirus pandemic, more education and exchange leaders than ever are seeking ways to use technology to reach young people whose lives have been disrupted by closed schools, cancelled trips, and prolonged isolation. The need to do something to keep people connected feels urgent. The experiences of youth participants, educators, facilitators, and administrators in the Initiative's programs—particularly those programs supported through a pandemic rapid response grant competition over the summer—may be instructive to those seeking to start or join a program, or those who want to gain insight they might apply to any kind of online learning or communication.

Evaluation: Summer 2019 and Academic Year 2019-2020

The Stevens Initiative continues to work with RTI International (RTI) on an independent evaluation of grantees' virtual exchange programs. Since the beginning of the collaboration with the Initiative in 2016, RTI has taken a developmental approach to evaluation, providing real-time feedback to enable adaptation and flexibility in response to stakeholder needs. RTI provides technical assistance to grantee and Initiative staff and facilitates a community of practice to improve evaluation methods and build capacity. More information about RTI and their role in Stevens Initiative evaluation can be found in the 2019 Virtual Exchange Impact and Learning report, available on the **Resources Page** on the Stevens Initiative website.

Over the past year, RTI and the Stevens Initiative have updated the evaluation framework in response to an evolving understanding of effective practices in studying virtual exchange programs. These updates include improvements to survey items for quantitative analysis and protocols used in data collection. Some updates reflected in the survey results listed below include removing the Knowledge of Other retrospective question in the spring 2020 evaluation cycle, reducing both the Perspective Taking and Cross-Cultural Collaboration domains from two survey scales each to one survey scale each, disaggregating the Empathy/Warm Feelings domain into two separate domains, and adding a Self-Other Overlap domain.

Participant Demographics

During the summer and fall of 2019 and the spring of 2020, 3,560 young people participated in programs supported by the Stevens Initiative: 2,023 participants in 32 U.S. states and the District of Columbia and 1,537 participants in 11 countries across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and the Palestinian Territories. In both the United States and the MENA region, the Stevens Initiative reached secondary (middle school and high school) and postsecondary youth.

The Initiative strives to increase access to international exchange for young people who might not otherwise have the opportunity to participate in a cultural exchange program. Some commonly used metrics, such as income level, are difficult to ascertain, because younger students may not be able to reliably report this information, and it is a sensitive question to ask of any participant. RTI collected data about the following characteristics that might suggest students at those institutions may have had fewer opportunities for cultural exchange, compared with students at other institutions.

SUMMER AND FALL 2019: INSTITUTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

Percentage of participants who attended public institutions	U.S. Secondary School Level	**83%**
	MENA Region Secondary School Level	**88%**
	U.S. Postsecondary Level	**87%**
	MENA Region Postsecondary Level	**67%**
Percentage of MENA region participants who attended institutions where the primary language of instruction was not English	Secondary School Level	**96%**
	Postsecondary Level	**75%**
Percentage of U.S. participants	At the Secondary School Level Who Attended Title 1 Schools	**36%**
	At the Postsecondary Level Who Attended Community Colleges	**44%**

SPRING 2020: INSTITUTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

Percentage of participants who attended public institutions	U.S. Secondary School Level	**97%**
	MENA Region Secondary School Level	**68%**
	U.S. Postsecondary Level	**99%**
	MENA Region Postsecondary Level	**74%**
Percentage of MENA region participants who attended institutions where the primary language of instruction was not English	Secondary School Level	**100%**
	Postsecondary Level	**57%**
Percentage of U.S. participants	At the Secondary School Level Who Attended Title 1 Schools	**76%**
	At the Postsecondary Level Who Attended Community Colleges	**48%**

Survey Results

The Stevens Initiative and RTI worked with all Initiative grantees to administer pre- and post-program surveys to measure changes in participants' global competencies during their participation in the program. These updated survey items, along with other evaluation resources such as qualitative protocols, are publicly available on the **Resources Page** on the Stevens Initiative website. Each survey scale included in the tables below was developed over time and with input from grantee staff who work with educators or facilitators to implement programs. While not all-encompassing, the Initiative believes these domains provide an opportunity to examine some of what is gained through participation in our supported virtual exchange programs.

To understand the impact shown in these tables, it is important to note that 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. A positive effect size indicates an increase in the specific domain of the global competency listed, whereas a negative effect size indicates a decrease in that specific domain. Effect sizes of at least 0.20 (20% of a standard deviation), a reasonable threshold for reporting small but substantively meaningful effects, are highlighted with bold text. Effect sizes that are statistically significant are marked with an asterisk (*). It is important to note that some domains included below are retrospective. These survey items ask participants to "think back to before you started [program name]" and assess themselves, and that retrospective response was compared with their post-program response. Results for cross-cultural communication and cross-cultural communication–retrospective are not shown for summer and fall 2019 due to low numbers of responses.

SUMMER AND FALL 2019: EFFECT SIZES AND TOTAL NUMBERS (N), BY REGION

	MENA	U.S.	All	n MENA	n U.S.	n Total
Knowledge of Other	**0.57***	**1.18***	**0.76***	477	324	801
Knowledge of Other – Retrospective	**0.57***	**0.82***	**0.65***	479	324	803
Perspective Taking	0.13*	0.02	0.08*	463	325	788
Perspective Taking – Retrospective	**0.52***	**0.38***	**0.46***	463	319	782
Empathy	0.05	**-0.23***	-0.07	92	74	166
Empathy – Retrospective	**0.27***	**0.25***	**0.26***	90	72	162
Cross-Cultural Collaboration	**0.20***	0.04	0.13*	465	322	787
Cross-Cultural Collaboration – Retrospective	**0.71***	**0.47***	**0.61***	463	321	784
Self-Other Overlap	**0.25***	**0.58***	**0.36***	463	303	766
Warm Feelings	**0.20***	**0.43***	**0.28***	382	228	610

SPRING 2020: EFFECT SIZES AND TOTAL NUMBERS (N), BY REGION

	MENA	U.S.	All	n MENA	n U.S.	n Total
Knowledge of Other	**0.57***	**1.12***	**0.84***	408	543	951
Perspective Taking	0.19*	**0.28***	**0.25***	330	535	865
Perspective Taking – Retrospective	**0.43***	**0.31***	**0.36***	392	554	946
Empathy	0.10	-0.08	0.02	178	143	321
Empathy – Retrospective	**0.25***	0.14	0.19*	148	113	261
Cross-Cultural Communication	**0.32***	**0.39**	**0.35***	66	41	107
Cross-Cultural Communication – Retrospective	**0.48***	**0.30**	**0.40***	65	41	106
Cross-Cultural Collaboration	**0.25***	**0.33***	**0.30***	378	532	910
Cross-Cultural Collaboration – Retrospective	**0.39***	**0.31***	**0.34***	363	520	883
Self-Other Overlap	**0.21***	**0.92***	**0.55***	412	538	950
Warm Feelings	0.18*	**0.30***	**0.25***	266	363	629

Most programs also asked participants if they would recommend the program to their peers, as a way to gauge participant satisfaction with their experience.

|	MENA	U.S.	n MENA	n U.S.
Percentage of summer and fall 2019 participants who agreed or strongly agreed that they would recommend the program to others	91%	70%	533	420
Percentage of spring 2020 participants who agreed or strongly agreed that they would recommend the program to others	88%	79%	493	614

Notable Outcomes

Reflecting on these survey results, Stevens Initiative staff observed multiple outcomes or changes that should be noted:

- **Multiple positive changes:** The Initiative is very encouraged that participants reported statistically significant positive changes in all domains shown in the tables except for the non-retrospective empathy survey scale during both time periods. Effect sizes for all gains were larger than 0.20 – a reasonable threshold for small but meaningful effects – for all domains except for the non-retrospective perspective taking and non-retrospective cultural collaboration scale in summer and fall 2019 and the retrospective empathy scale in spring 2020.

- **Knowledge of the other country or culture:** During both periods, U.S. and MENA participants reported relatively large positive changes in their knowledge of the other country or culture. This was also true when this domain was examined retrospectively in the summer and fall 2019 period. This is consistent with data from previous periods; the Initiative's 2019 Impact and Learning Report found similar positive effects in this domain.

- **Comparison to previous report:** Compared to the data included in the Initiative's 2019 Impact and Learning Report, the survey data for the global competency domains for the periods in this report show more significant positive changes across multiple domains for both regions. While this development cannot be attributed to any particular steps taken by any of the actors involved, it is encouraging to see clearer indications that Initiative grantee programs may be having their intended effect.

The Initiative and RTI will continue to refine evaluation processes and work with grantees to use these findings to improve the virtual exchange experience for young people.
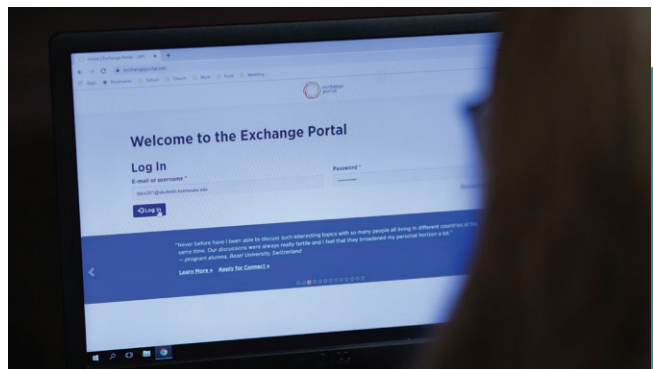
Virtual Exchange as a Response to the Pandemic

In April 2020, the Stevens Initiative responded to the coronavirus pandemic with a three-track approach to help education and exchange leaders and practitioners as they sought to develop programs for young people impacted by social distancing and other restrictions.

1. The Initiative launched a grant competition, inviting proposals to adapt in-person education and exchange programs to virtual ones, to help organizations adapt existing virtual exchanges to crisis conditions, and to support facilitators' preparation for future virtual exchanges. The Initiative awarded 18 grants supporting activities that took place from July through September 2020, engaging 1,077 young people and training 200 adults. Grantees reported that they planned to serve several thousand more young people during the 2020-2021 academic year based on what they learned and developed over the summer.

2. The Initiative offered live training and mentorship opportunities for organizations to increase administrator and educator capacities to engage with students through virtual exchange programs and activities. Four hundred and sixty people from 265 schools, institutions, and organizations attended a sequence of three large training sessions and participated in 48 individual or small group follow-up sessions with mentors.

3. The Initiative curated and disseminated a list of 45 recorded and written resources to help educators adapt to new conditions and learn how to continue providing global learning opportunities. The Initiative also published a guide for Senior Internationalization Officers at higher education institutions.

Lessons Learned

Through this response effort, Initiative staff members gained valuable insight into the challenges that confront educators and exchange practitioners who turn to virtual exchange as an increasingly necessary tool to meet global learning needs. The six lessons below provide a summary of this learning, often mentioning grantees from our grant competition. More information about those grantees can be found here.

1. **There is no "easy pivot" to virtual exchange.** When the pandemic disrupted in-person education and exchange programs, many leaders thought to pivot immediately to virtual modalities to fill the gap. Educators and administrators realized that running a successful virtual exchange requires careful planning, resource dedication, capacity building, and thoughtful partnerships, none of which can be achieved overnight. Many in-person learning or exchange programs tend to be one-sided: students traveling to the United States are likely the primary intended beneficiaries of their exchange program; programs designed to expose U.S. students to the history and culture of another country may not involve a reciprocal discussion of life in the United States for students in the other country. To be effective, virtual exchange programs need to be engaging and mutually beneficial for participants on all sides, a change in purpose that often requires a fundamental change in how every aspect of a program is designed and conducted. Building trust among partners by incorporating all perspectives from the earliest stages of planning may not seem possible under time constraints but often proves indispensable.

2. **Disruptions to in-person learning carry over to virtual exchange.** Practitioners sometimes err in assuming that because virtual exchange activities happen online, young people can easily participate from home when in-person education is cancelled. In practice, however, many virtual exchange programs are designed to be conducted in a traditional classroom and require extensive planning to adapt to remote learning. As a result of the pandemic, young people also faced new or additional familial obligations, economic hardships, and lack of access to technology. One Initiative grantee pointed out that "virtual exchange might make intercultural engagement possible during a pandemic, but it doesn't address the pandemic itself and the many traumas that students (and facilitators and staff) may bring to the exchange." Participants from Initiative-funded programs encountered power outages, health crises, and other disruptions compounded, or created, by the pandemic. In turn, educators, facilitators, and participants learned to be patient, tolerant, and understanding of the evolving effects of the pandemic on all involved.

3. **Young people are motivated to connect with international peers through virtual exchange even when they are already expected to spend so much time in front of a computer or mobile device screen.** Administrators or educators may wonder whether young people would be interested in engaging with their peers virtually in addition to the many hours they likely spend in remote work or learning during social distancing. Or they may doubt that an online exchange would be appealing to a student whose study abroad program was cancelled. Despite these understandable concerns, Initiative grantees who ran virtual exchanges during spring and summer of 2020 found that young people enthusiastically embraced the opportunity to communicate with peers around the world. Participants in one summer program noted that they valued learning about different cultures and viewpoints, a particularly special opportunity when so many forms of interaction were on hold.

4. **Facilitators or educators with existing ties to participants can be effective in introducing new participants to virtual exchange.** Due to the pandemic, many educators and organizations found themselves trying to engage youth virtually who had never participated in a virtual exchange before. A vital part of a successful virtual exchange is building authentic trust among participants and facilitators, which can be challenging in online spaces. Grantees found that a successful way to engage and retain participants was to include facilitators with existing relationships to the participants. The Global Education Benchmark Group (GEBG) required participants to be joined by an educator from their school in order to enroll in their summer program. These educators served as a bridge between the participants and the non-profit organizations implementing the exchange. Another grantee, iEARN, used Moroccan facilitators and alumni of past virtual exchange programs who were able to provide support to Moroccan students. And United Planet found it useful to include university students as captains for high school student teams, providing a near-peer connection to the program. During grantee reflection sessions held after summer programs wrapped up, many organizations echoed that the strength of their programs came from the ease and comfort gained by building on these foundations of trust.

5. **Methods that work for in-person learning don't always translate to a virtual space. Program designers should pay special attention to adapting curricula and learning goals effectively.** Virtual exchange programs must strike a delicate balance between engagement and education. Organizations conducting virtual exchange for the first time may have hoped to use curricula or activity plans from their in-person programs. However, many organizations quickly realized that they needed to modify their plans substantially to facilitate an opportunity for interactive learning and communication. Citizen Diplomacy International of Philadelphia decided to focus on fewer topics but go into more depth on each of them than they do in their in-person exchange programs. WorldChicago added a daily icebreaker to begin each session and created an open space to reflect synchronously, or in real time, after sessions. Practitioners also realized they needed to account for the fatigue brought on by connecting through technology. "Being on Zoom for an extended period of time is draining, and we structured the days to be both shorter and contain many more breaks than our in-person program," a grantee said.

6. **Make time and space for unstructured learning.** Informal interaction is an indispensable part of any education or exchange program. Practitioners should include unstructured or loosely structured time and space in virtual exchange program plans. Online activities can tend to be rigid and fast-paced, leaving few opportunities to relax and discuss topics that aren't on the formal agenda. GEBG hosted an optional videoconference "teachers' lounge" for facilitators immediately prior to program sessions, creating space for casual conversation, constructive feedback, or simply time to drink coffee with colleagues. Asynchronous messaging tools like WhatsApp and Telegram offer program participants the space to continue their conversations past program sessions, helping them develop friendships and a sense of community. Although participants cannot eat a meal in the same room as one another, several virtual programs sought to create this space virtually. The Experiment Digital offered the option of a virtual homestay, giving participants from across the world the opportunity to "host" another participant over a weekend – which could include cooking a meal with them and introducing them to family members. "I feel like conversations you have after a meal, like when you're kind of finishing up and everyone stays at the dinner table, are really different than most conversations you have because you've already had that experience of bonding over the food and connecting, so you're already subconsciously at a place of understanding," a Tomorrow's Women participant said after a virtual dinner. "You start to have more intellectual conversations, or deeper conversations with your family or the people you're eating with."

2020 Update: Effective Practices and Common Challenges in Virtual Exchange

This section is a supplement to the list of common challenges and effective practices shared in the **2019 Impact and Learning Report**. These items are drawn primarily from RTI's site visits with two programs, which generally included observing activities, interviewing key stakeholders such as administrators and facilitators, and conducting focus groups with participants. They may not be appropriate or applicable to all programs or contexts.

Program Design

Effective Practice: **Develop high quality asynchronous activities to balance synchronous activities.** A commonly held assumption is that virtual exchange participants prefer synchronous activities with their international peers over asynchronous activities. While synchronous activities can be effective to accomplish a number of learning and exchange goals, participants and facilitators have noted the benefit of incorporating asynchronous activities into a virtual exchange to balance out the pace and type of effort needed. Asynchronous exchange activities allow participants to interact at times that are more individually convenient and often mimic the way organic communication happens among their other social groups like group text exchanges among friends or conversations in family WhatsApp groups. Some exchange facilitators mentioned that a balance of activity communication types is more similar to a traditional work environment, another beneficial soft skill participants may learn from this arrangement.

Effective Practice: **Use small groups to build relationships between participants.** When possible and appropriate to the virtual exchange model, programs should include opportunities for participants to meet with a set group of peers regularly in small groups. These sustained small group opportunities foster a feeling of community and allow participants to share details and connect at a more personal level.

Common Challenge: **Ensuring technology and facilitation capacity for new programs or for programs that are rapidly expanding.** When designing a virtual exchange program, administrators often estimate the number of participants for a given component or activity and use that assumption when preparing a technology infrastructure or facilitation plan. New programs can often underestimate the capacity needed for these components. Existing programs attempting to scale or facing rapid growth in participants can also overlook additional needs that would be required for technology or facilitation for this expansion.

Common Challenge: **Designing a program that accurately builds in the time required to accomplish all program goals.** As previously stated in the 2019 Impact and Learning Report, virtual exchange stakeholders frequently cite a challenge of effectively planning a curriculum that allows enough time to accomplish everything they want over the course of a program. Balancing "get to know you" and orientation activities, content-specific learning goals, program management activities, and other participant support can be difficult for all virtual exchange implementers.

Technology

Common Challenge: **Setting expectations for video use during paired or small group synchronous activities that balance privacy and technological limitations with effective communication.** In some virtual exchange programs, participants engage in synchronous videoconference activities. While communication is often more effective when participants' cameras are turned on, some participants prefer to leave their cameras off or are not able to turn them on. This preference could be attributed to privacy concerns, particularly along gender or regional lines, or to bandwidth limitations. Practitioners should solicit participant input as they seek to balance these factors and to determine what works best for their program.

Facilitation

Effective Practice: **A number of facilitation practices were found to be effective for engaging participants in virtual exchange activities, including:**

- Using previously posted asynchronous comments as a conversation starter in a synchronous exchange with participants;
- Proactively signaling conversation topics ahead of a synchronous session and/or summarizing topics and posting questions in a chat box to help participants prepare or stay on track and to support English learners;
- Providing an agenda and behavior norms at the beginning of each synchronous session, naming action items or next steps at the end, and sharing a recording shortly after each meeting.

Effective Practice: **Virtual exchange administrators can support facilitators in several ways, including:**

- Incorporating hands-on or experiential activities during facilitation training to help facilitators overcome inevitable challenges and increase confidence in exchange activity implementation;
- Providing tools, training, coaching, and resources for facilitators to manage cross-cultural learning activities and assist learners for whom English is a second language;
- Planning and implementing ongoing support for facilitators throughout the duration of the program to resolve issues, provide technology assistance, and give and receive feedback. This can include support from fellow facilitators or coaches in addition to program staff.