

Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) at a Community College

Helen Chang, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
Behavioral and Social Sciences Department
Eugenio María de Hostos Community College of The City University of New York

Abstract: Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) is a form of virtual exchange that connects a U.S. based class with a class at a college or university outside the U.S. Students from each class work together on one or various assignments in bi-national teams for several weeks during the semester. At a community college like Hostos College, CUNY, where students have few options to study abroad, COIL provides a structured opportunity to engage with peers in other countries, especially with students at 4-year institutions. In 2023, one of my Introduction to American Government sections was paired with two MENA region university classes in Allied Health, focused on a newly created comparative healthcare inequality project. Evaluating my COIL experience highlighted the need for open education resources (OER) not only in the project material but also the project itself as well as the importance of communication and partnership with a 4-year institution. I present the OER resources produced as well as preliminary student data that show some indications that the goals of virtual exchange were achieved.

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Introduction

Ideally, an international experience should be part of a college student's education, whatever their career goals, socioeconomic status, or field of study. The traditional view of an international experience is an in-person study abroad experience, which can include interning, studying, or volunteering abroad. Besides studying abroad's many benefits to students, it also aligns with many colleges' mission of creating global citizens and communicators. However, at two-year institutions, enrichment opportunities like studying abroad are limited, both by the lack of institutional offerings and student time and resources. This challenge can also be present at four year institutions, since an estimated 10% of U.S. college students study abroad each year (Stevens Initiative, 2025b). In addition, minority college students are still under-represented in study abroad programs and most U.S. college students study abroad in Europe, with 50 percent of students studying in just five countries, Spain, Italy, the United Kingdom, France, and Ireland (NAFSA, 2025a).

Virtual exchange allows community college students access to global experiences, connecting them with their peers in other countries at low or zero cost, using a more neutral online third space mediated through technology. Unlike in-person study abroad programs, both sides of the exchange travel virtually, rather than one student traveling to another campus or country. Additionally, community college students can also engage with students at a four year institution, adding another dimension to the exchange. Similar to in-person student abroad programs, students participating in virtual exchanges can also experience new social and cultural perspectives, learn how to navigate different cultures, work with diverse peers, and even communicate in other languages in some cases. Moreover, students can practice critical skills needed to succeed in academic and professional settings, such as collaboration through difference, communication, digital and technological literacy, and cross-cultural awareness.

Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) is a structured form of virtual exchange that connects a U.S. based class with a class at a college or university outside the U.S.¹ Students from each class work together on one or various assignments in bi-national teams for several weeks during the semester. Each COIL exchange module is centered around a shared topic that fits into each class's curriculum. The topic provides opportunities for each class to share elements of their culture with the other class and for student collaboration. Before beginning a COIL exchange, both classes in the exchange prepare their students for intercultural and international virtual communication, typically through country introduction and online behavior expectation activities. COIL modules usually have three classic activities: (1) ice breaker, (2) comparative analysis, and a (3) collaborative project.

In the academic year 2022-2023, I, along with other CUNY faculty, was a Stevens Initiative Global Scholars Achieving Career Success (GSACS) Fellow. GSACS was a sizable COIL program that involved five CUNY campuses and four partner universities in the Middle East and North Africa region. The Fall 2022 semester was used to create the COIL module with my MENA region partner, a 4-year university in Palestine. Then, in Spring 2023, one of my Introduction to American Government sections was paired with two MENA region university classes in Allied Health (physical therapy and radiology technology), focused on a newly created collaborative comparative healthcare inequality project. Evaluating my COIL experience highlighted the need for open education resources (OER) not only in the project material but also the project itself as well as the importance of communication and partnership with a 4-year institution. I present the OER resources produced as well as preliminary student data that show some indications that the goals of virtual exchange were achieved.

¹ The SUNY COIL Center has developed and promoted COIL through <https://coil.suny.edu/>, including a global network connecting teaching professionals around the world, SUNY COIL Global Network <https://coil.suny.edu/global-network/>.

Section 2: Brief Overview of the Virtual Exchange Literature

Starting in 2018, the *Journal of Virtual Exchange* began publishing online, open-access, peer-reviewed articles on virtual exchange practices and impact evaluations. In the most recent issue, Abuzant et al. (2024) used a thematic analysis of student reflections to illustrate the development of interpersonal skills development and a culturally enrichment for both sides of the exchange. The Stevens Initiative has also released a detailed Evaluation Toolkit for instructors to use to quantitatively and qualitatively evaluate their COIL modules.² This toolkit includes best practices to assess areas from training to program implementation and outcomes. Additionally, since 2019, the Stevens Initiative has published a yearly impact report on its virtual exchange programs.³ In its 2023 report, the Stevens Initiative notably showcased high participant satisfaction and significant effect sizes for: knowledge of others, perspective taking, and cross-cultural collaboration.

Section 3: COIL at Hostos in POL 101 American Government

Unlike typical COIL partnerships, in which faculty choose each other in similar disciplines, my POL 101 American Government course was paired with two Allied Health classes at Palestine Ahliya University (PAU), a 4-year institution in Bethlehem. Despite the differences in discipline, my faculty partners and I designed 3 activities around the theme of comparative healthcare access and inequalities in the Bronx and Palestine, creating an 8 week module. With different time zones and academic calendars, we planned for a primarily asynchronous COIL module, using Slack (community based instant messaging app), Zoom, and smartphone videos. For the Pre-Exchange activity, each class was provided short country briefs and an online behavior guide from the GSACS program and online, along with a video introduction of NYC and a video introduction of Palestine chosen by each faculty. Before starting

² Toolkit resource: <https://www.stevensinitiative.org/resource/evaluating-virtual-exchange-toolkit/>

³ The 2023 report can be found at: <https://www.stevensinitiative.org/resource/2023-virtual-exchange-impact-and-learning-report/>

the virtual exchange, to prepare each class discussed the course materials during one in-person class session. We randomly assigned students into binational teams with 2 Hostos students and 3 PAU students on Slack.

The first activity was icebreaker videos and responses. Students used their phones or devices to record a 5 minute introduction video that included their name, major, hometown, favorite foods and hobbies. These videos were posted to Slack. Then, Hostos students had to respond to the PAU students via video, audio, or written comments and vice versa.

The second activity required students from each group to research healthcare inequalities in their own neighborhoods and communities and prepare 2-3 slides or 1 page paper to post on Slack. Hostos students and PAU students met in their binational teams and the two groups meet asynchronously over Slack to share their presentations and ask questions. They prepared a comparative analysis, highlighting similarities and differences students found across the Bronx and Palestine creating a shared slide show that was posted on Slack.

The final activity started a synchronous Zoom panel session hosted by PAU about healthcare in Palestine, featuring guest speakers from PAU with a question and answer session. Hostos students prepared a community healthcare map and analysis. A binational team PowerPoint presentation prepared by students asynchronously over Slack, which describes the project theme and the similarities and differences of healthcare inequalities in each country. The collaborative slideshows were presented at a student conference as part of the GSACS Program.⁴

Section 4: Evaluation of POL 101 COIL Module

My preliminary evaluation of the POL 101 COIL experience includes: (1) student reflection analysis, (2) CUNY assessment rubrics for COIL assignments, and (3) benefits and

⁴ The COIL module described in this paper is available as a Open Education Resource (OER) on: <https://opencoil.commons.gc.cuny.edu/2024/07/17/comparative-health-inequalities/>

challenges to faculty.⁵ Hostos students completed five reflective in-class writing assignments during the COIL module, after each activity and at the end of the semester. Using a content analysis of these reflective writing assignments, common student themes related to value were: cultural exchange, learning about MENA region and Palestine, Slack platform and slideshow preparation, exposure to senior college level students, and surprise at the many similarities in healthcare in Palestine. Common student themes related to challenges were: deadlines, language, asynchronous modality, peer feedback and communication, community based knowledge, and disciplinary/professional knowledge. Table 1 and 2 summarizes the content analysis of student reflection assignments.

Table 1: Content Analysis Value Themes

Value Themes	%	N mentions	N Total
Cultural exchange	44.94	40	89
Learning about MENA region and Palestine	41.57	37	89
Similarities in healthcare in Palestine	40.45	36	89
Slack platform and slideshow preparation	24.72	22	89
Exposure to senior college level students	25.84	23	89

Table 2: Content Analysis Challenge Themes

Challenge Themes	%	N mentions	N Total
Language	42.70	38	89
Asynchronous modality	34.83	31	89
Deadlines	31.46	28	89
Peer feedback and communication	24.72	22	89
Community based knowledge	16.85	15	89

⁵ The Stevens Initiative collected survey data for their use that has not yet been published.

Disciplinary/professional knowledge	17.98	16	89
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In addition, POL 101 is a general education course and uses CUNY common Pathways learning outcomes assessment. Table 3 reports the number of POL 101 students who completed the SLOs and the students who met the SLOs with passing grades. The numbers of students who complete and meet the CUNY SLOs are comparable to a typical POL 101 class where students complete a final research project on a local political issue.

Table 3: CUNY Pathways SLOs and Student Outcomes

CUNY Pathways General Education Student Learning Outcomes (SLO)	COIL Student Learning Outcomes	Number of Students Completed the SLOs	Number of Students with passing grades on the SLOs
Gather, interpret, and assess information from a variety of sources and points of view.	Define cross-national comparison concepts and collect information and measurements on those concepts. COIL Activity 2.	18	14
Evaluate evidence and arguments critically or analytically.	Evaluate cross-national data and measurements. COIL Activity 3.	18	14
Produce well-reasoned written or oral arguments using evidence to support conclusions.	Communicating effectively with international peers on collaborative assignments. COIL Activity 1.	19	15

Benefits of COIL from my faculty experience include: an accessible way to build in comparative methods and comparative analyses even in an American politics course, built in career competencies development, course enhancement/high impact practices like conference presentations, external connections to international faculty, and a student showcase for their local and international expertise outside our classroom. Challenges from my experience include:

workload creating the COIL module, partnership workload and communication, the duration of the module and the ability of students to complete the module in addition to regular coursework, and language and group dynamic issues.

Section 5: Conclusion

My first experience with COIL through the Stevens Initiative's GSACS program was positive and promising based on student data, CUNY SLOs, and my faculty based assessment. The GSACS fellowship provided funding and faculty training for COIL, which is a significant hurdle for community college faculty. In addition, the creation and implementation of COIL modules is another potential hurdle for faculty interested in trying COIL in their classrooms. As a result, I and other Hostos faculty created a OER COIL Starter Kit that is a resource for all faculty who are interested in COIL. My module is included in this OER site. Post-pandemic, virtual exchange at community colleges can be an accessible and effective alternative to in-person study abroad programs. However, evaluating virtual exchange more rigorously and comprehensively will be required to contribute to the development of COIL.

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