

Bluefield State College Continues to Participate in Expanding International Cross-Cultural Exchange Program

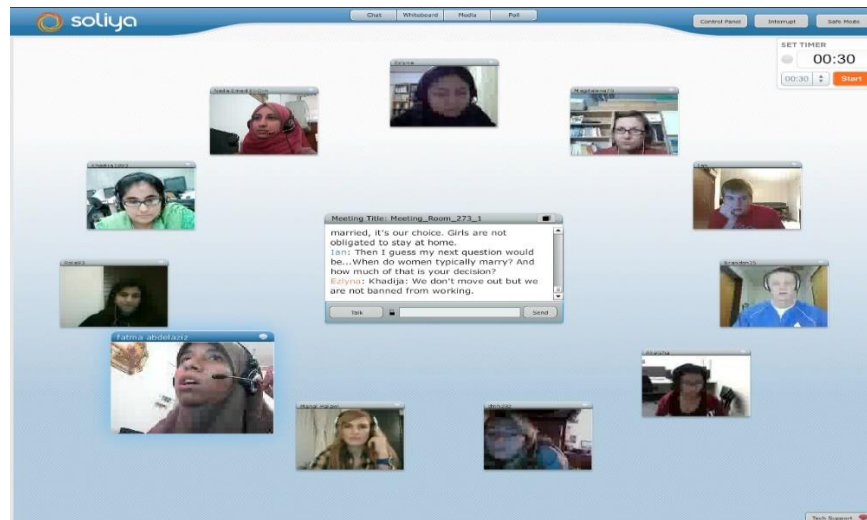
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Twenty-one members of the Bluefield State College Seminar in Social Sciences class (SOSC 490), the capstone course for Social Sciences majors, participated this past spring 2017 semester in the Soliya Connect Program, a cross-cultural international exchange program which this year brought together more than 1300 students representing 72 nationalities from 52 academic institutions in 13 countries from around the world, including students from 13 states in the United States. This is the third year BSC has participated in the Soliya Connect Program.

Founded in 2003, the Soliya Connect Program is an international exchange program which initially connected students in the United States with their counterparts in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region to provide a platform for youth from these disparate parts of the world in the hopes of initiating a dialogue on critical cultural and political issues confronting these areas. From its initial beginnings, Soliya has continued to expand and now includes students from both North and South America, Europe, the Middle East and North Africa, and Asia allowing students to communicate, via voice and image interface, with their student colleagues wherever they are in the world via specialized communication software called Exchange 2.0.

Students from each participating institution are put into groups of approximately eight students with approximately half of each group composed of students from the Middle East and North Africa. Students participate in two-hour weekly discussion sessions addressing various cultural and political issues of the day. Readings on the various issues are provided, and the cross-cultural dialogue is structured to facilitate an honest exchange of views of students. The software utilized enables each group member to visually see and communicate with all other group members simultaneously. Facilitators, who are Soliya alumni, provide direction to group discussions, but it is the students who are key to the dynamics of the Connect Program.



Combining the Latin word for sun, “sol”, with the ancient Arabic word for light, “إيّا (إضاءة), the name reflects the program’s aim “to bridge divides and shed light on cultural differences that too often seem inevitable and intractable.”

As one BSC student recounts her initial experience in the Soliya Connect Program:

For one of my classes this semester, we were required to participate in this Soliya program. I had heard of this program in previous semesters but never had to participate in it so I wasn’t quite sure how it would go.

Prior to the first meeting face to face via webcam, we were asked to do an assignment to introduce ourselves, talk about positive and negative feedback and differences between a debate and dialogue. It was interesting to see where people were from and how they viewed dialogue and all that.

The first week of seeing everyone face to face was interesting and a little uneasy at first, especially popping into the meeting room when there was not any one in there yet. However, we all went around and introduced ourselves, where we went to school/ what we were going for and where we were from. My group had people from here (United States), Jordan, Pakistan and Columbia. Our facilitators were from Canada and one lived in California but originally from Egypt. I think it was pretty cool to see such a diverse group to conversate with.

Throughout the weeks of this program, we talked about different issues such as gender stereotypes, Isis, Trump ban against Middle Easterns, problems in our communities versus problems in other communities that may be similar or differ, etc. It was interesting to see how some countries were more alike than others and how the other countries were more strict or lenient depending upon the issue we discussed.

Associate Professor of Political Science, Dr. Colin S. Cavell, who teaches the Social Sciences seminar at BSC believes the Soliya Connect Program both widens students’ perspectives of their world by introducing them to their student counterparts in other regions of the globe while simultaneously deepening their understanding of how others perceive and address contemporary global issues. “Not only does the program sharpen their critical thinking skills,” notes Cavell, “but, as well, the Soliya Connect Program provides our BSC students with an international cross-cultural exchange opportunity which is oftentimes too costly for our students to participate in. With Soliya, a student does not have to be wealthy in order to interact with and learn aspects of various world cultures. This is a program that is ideally suited for students in southern West Virginia. And, most importantly, the students very much appreciate it.”



Utilizing what it calls Civil Media, Soliya seeks to empower the emerging community of young adults from around the world to amplify voices from civil society so as to catalyze constructive and respectful discourse across divisions about important sociopolitical issues. Soliya is a partner of the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations, a project of the UN Secretary-General that aims “to reduce tensions across cultural divides that threaten to inflame existing political conflicts or trigger new ones.”

Through its programs of international communication, Soliya hopes to replace the usual method of confrontation and coercion in international relations to a process of cooperation and compassion. By providing student participants with a forum to articulate and share their perspectives on world events, and by recruiting past participants as group facilitators, and by sponsoring conferences and venues for sustained communication and collaboration, Soliya offers the benefits normally associated with international study and travel to a broad array of college students without having to physically leave their campus and/or spend thousands of dollars. Student participants obtain the benefit of meeting their peer-group colleagues in other parts of the world while sharing views on cultural and political ongoing developments. Not only does Soliya internationalize the curriculum by students sharing the ideas they have encountered in their group conversations, but, as well, new and exciting vistas are opened up for students who are now connected to a much wider world than many of them ever imagined.

In line with West Virginia’s HEPC Director of International Programs, Dr. Clark Egnor, as well as BSC’s Coordinator of International Initiatives, Professor Sudhakar Jamkhani, Soliya believes that it should become the norm in the 21st century for students to have a profound cross-cultural experience as part of their education, whether it is in person or online. It has thus partnered with a number of organizations, educational institutions, and other key partners to make this collaborative vision a reality.

Attached, for those interested in further reading, is an example of one student discussion group’s exchange of views on the role of women in their respective societies.

For additional information, contact Colin S. Cavell, Ph.D. at ccavell@bluefieldstate.edu or 304-327-4034.