

Soliya 1YC at SUNY Potsdam Proposal

Starting in the summer of 2020, all first-year students at SUNY Potsdam will participate in the Soliya First-Year Connect (1YC) program before they arrive on campus. This group will be the first cohort in a two-year pilot program (AY20-21 & AY 21-22). 1YC's primary goal is to allow students to establish deep and meaningful connections with their SUNY Potsdam family through constructive engagement with difference in facilitated dialog sessions.

Note: Not all components of this proposal have been fully coordinated yet. Some still require approval by the administration and specific offices and programs that will cooperate with the Soliya program. After all approvals have been secured and all processes have been coordinated, a final proposal will be presented. Depending on approval processes, a final proposal will hopefully be available by the end of January or beginning of February to ensure successful implementation.

Approach

The Soliya 1YC program aims to help incoming SUNY Potsdam students to get to know each other more deeply, understand each other better, and find ways to constructively engage each other in a polarizing United States.

The Soliya 1YC Program builds on a strength our campus already has, our diversity. Our students from NY state, which constitute a vast majority of our students at SUNY Potsdam, arrive on our campus after they have gone through the most segregated school system in the nation. Most of our students have often had only very limited opportunity to engage with diverse populations. To help our incoming first-years with becoming a member of a diverse and inclusive community, students meet on a virtual video-conferencing platform in groups representative of our campus diversity and are introduced to facilitated

dialog as a form of communication. The curriculum helps students to experience diversity positively and deepens understanding and respect for constructive coexistence across differences.

1YC provides a structured, safe space for students to discuss their differences in a way that builds trust and respect between them, establishes habits of constructive discourse from their first interactions with one another, and equips the students to re-enforce those norms during times of on-campus tension and polarizing moments in the public life (i.e. 2020 Presidential Election). In addition, 1YC provides an avenue to allow for a deep commitment to freedom of speech while creating a feeling of belonging. At its core, this approach also enhances our liberal arts approach to education by broadening students' horizons, providing them with highly relevant job and life skills, and creating 21st century citizens.

In the long term, the 1YC will establish a culture of dialog and engagement on our campus. Once this goal is achieved, the next step could be the establishment of a Center for Dialog on our campus to engage the larger community in which we live. This could allow SUNY Potsdam an increased and sustainable positive impact on the North Country.

Upon the successful completion of the 2 year pilot, Soliya plans to expand this approach with an aim of 200 universities and colleges across the United States. This would allow SUNY Potsdam an early implementer and leadership role in an innovative approach to creating diverse and inclusive academic communities that are based on respect and constructive engagement with difference.

Timing

Students engage in facilitated dialog sessions for 4 weeks (2 hours each session) before they arrive on campus. For this year's iteration, after coordination with the First-Year Student Experience Task Force, it was decided that the ideal dates are: July 20 to Aug 14, 2020.

From the time students confirm their attendance to a school, they start to organically connect with other incoming students online – they seek out their group of belonging. By the time they arrive on campus, they have already seeded the relationships they will form and will socialize with the people they naturally feel comfortable around. While the important formation of identity communities will continue on our campus, 1YC aims to provide students with a path to establishing meaningful relationships with others who may not share membership in some of their identity groups. By starting this process before students arrive on campus, 1YC will form bonds among diverse groups of students that allow for a broader social network and deeper understanding across difference.

1YC will also help to positively shape the students' first impressions of SUNY Potsdam, which have lasting effects. 1YC is a way to make students feel heard, welcomed, and embraced before they even step on campus. 1YC should allow students to create more deep personal connections on campus that we know influence retention.

Facilitated Dialog Sessions

In 1YC, students take part in dialogue sessions in groups of 8-12. They meet face-to-face virtually 2hrs weekly, over 4 weeks, on Soliya's custom online videoconferencing platform called Exchange Portal. Trained facilitators lead the dialogue. Initially most of the facilitators are provided by Soliya. In the long run and in a gradual process, the aim is to provide all facilitation from within the SUNY Potsdam community. Sessions are semi-structured, following a tried and tested curriculum (in other Soliya dialog programs), while also giving space to students to decide the specific discussion topics (e.g. race relations, the MeToo movement, gun violence, etc.) they would like to explore each week.

Online

Many students say most political and social discussion now takes place online and we want to meet them where they already are. Therefore, Soliya 1YC takes place online and provides a distinctly different form of engagement than social media. While social media is often focused on conflict and debate, Soliya provides the opportunity to conversation and dialog instead. The Soliya Exchange Portal is a custom online videoconferencing platform that enables real-time audiovisual conversations. Collaboration amongst participants is supported by asynchronous engagement tools and a backend data management system for user-generated content.

Groups

Small, diverse groups carefully assigned for ideal size and composition participate in this semi-structured, sustained dialog. Each group comprised of 8-12 students and should reflect the diversity students will encounter here on campus. No final decision has been made, but the dimensions of social identity under consideration are: race/ethnicity, gender, LGBTQ+, socio-economic status, geographic location, and political ideology.

Session content

The 4 dialog sessions consist of semi-structured facilitated dialog and students are given plenty of opportunity to determine the topics they want to discuss. Each session serves a specific purpose in the dialog arc.

Session 1 – Ourselves in the campus community: program introduction, ground rules, hopes and fears, critical thinking, introduction to concepts of identity threat, multiple identities, concept of dialog

Session 2 – Interpersonal relationships and communication: listening and asking questions, essential elements of constructive communication, continue with identity threat and explore its implications on constructive communication

Session 3 – Our varied communities: intergroup relationships, bias and stereotypes

Session 4 – Activation: engagement in real and virtual spaces on campus and beyond

Outcomes

Soliya's facilitated dialog approach, which is used in 1YC and their other, international programs, tries to achieve 4 overarching goals:

Awareness

Activate emotional awareness and examine underlying assumptions, values, biases, social norms, and experiences that shape perspectives and positions.

Attitudes

Enable participants to exercise empathy and respect, acknowledging each other's humanity through an exploration of shared experiences and feelings.

Skills

Acquire 21st Century skills: critical thinking, collaboration, and communication in cross-identity community contexts that empower participants to embrace and thrive amidst diverse groups on campus and in a globalized society.

Activation

Inspire participants to instigate positive change by addressing local challenges with newfound skills and attitudes.

1YC at SUNY Potsdam

In addition to the general goals, 1YC aims to impact SUNY Potsdam in a variety of ways. If successfully implemented, we hope to see positive outcomes for our campus community and student learning.

Campus community

- Through 1YC we establish with students, before they step onto campus, a culture of constructive discourse that will positively influence campus interactions at large.
- The introduced and practiced norms and expectations of constructive discourse (largely lacking in our broader society today) will make student feel heard and respected and provide a welcoming first impression of the Potsdam community.
- The program will empower students to be the example-setters and cultural norm-setters during times of tension on our campus and during polarizing events in our society at large (i.e. 2020 Presidential Elections). Faculty and staff won't be alone in trying to enforce norms as students will be equipped and motivated to mobilize themselves and engage constructively.
- It will generate a sense of community across campus: a culture of mutual respect and solidarity. A community of trained student-facilitators can hold a community together during crises or when on-campus tensions mount.
- Soliya 1YC will help to generate an increased sense of community across campus where all identity groups feel at home and embraced. It creates safe spaces while also protecting free speech on campus.
- Models SUNY Potsdam as a community that actively works against the polarization present in U.S. society today that often leads to a lack of communication and cooperation.

Student Learning

- Enables students to build friendships across lines of diversity and difference. This should allow for both more diverse meaningful friendships and a broader social network for individual students.
- Equips students with essential skills and attitudes of a 21st century liberal arts education, including cross-difference communication and collaboration skills, empathy, critical thinking, critical awareness, community building, activation, and civic engagement.
- Empowers students to be the example-setters and cultural norm-setters during times of tension on campus.
- Establishes a culture of constructive discourse and generates a sense of belonging for individual students and identity groups on campus.
- Student participants and particularly the trained student facilitators will learn leadership skills and will be equipped and motivated to mobilize themselves.

Organizational Structure

In order to successfully implement 1YC at SUNY Potsdam and to integrate it into Potsdam's core institutional mission, the program should be housed within Academic Affairs. To ensure close coordination with our DEI plan, the Coordinator for 1YC should be appointed by the university's Chief Diversity Officer. To ensure successful integration and sustainable processes the 1YC Committee shall be established.

1YC Committee

The 1YC Committee is responsible for the planning, execution, and assessment of 1YC. The committee is chaired by the Coordinator for Soliya 1YC and works in close coordination with the Division of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, Potsdam Pathways, and the Student Success Center. The 1YC Committee meets at least twice per year. Once during the final weeks of the spring semester to coordinate all planning aspects for the summer. The committee shall also meet around the midpoint of each fall semester to ensure completion of the program and start planning for the next summer. The members of the committee are all members of the 1YC Executive Committee and the 1YC Advisory Board. Specific objectives for the committees are being developed.

1YC Executive Committee (1EC)

The 1YC Executive Committee is responsible for the concrete planning and implementation of 1YC each summer and fall (possibly also spring – tbd). The 1EC determines basic operational parameters such as dates and times of the dialog sessions and ensures enrollment of students in the program. It works with Soliya to help in the grouping of students and cooperates with Soliya to plan and execute the program. The 1EC will be chaired by the Coordinator for 1YC. Members of the 1EC should include representatives from Academic Affairs, all three schools, the Student Success Center, the Division of DEI, Campus Life, College Communications, students and faculty. The 1EC will meet depending on workload. Weekly to biweekly meetings are anticipated during

the beginning of the fall semester and the end of the spring semester. During all other times, the committee shall meet at least once a month.

1YC Advisory Board (1AB)

The 1YC Advisory Board is responsible for overseeing 1YC. It is focused on content, data collection, assessment, publications, and strategic planning for 1YC. The 1AB will closely monitor the effectiveness of the program. Based on the established performance markers, the collected data, and the available assessment, and in coordination with the 1EC, the 1AB will make a recommendation to President's Council regarding the continuation of the program after the initial trial period of 2 years. The 1AB will investigate ways in which the program can become fully sustainable beyond the initial trial period. The 1AB will be chaired by the Coordinator for 1YC. Membership in the 1AB is open to all campus members but shall not exceed 10. The current members of the 1AB are: Deborah Conrad (Education), Claudia Ford (Environmental Studies), Libbie Freed (History), Rob Hinckley (Politics), Matt LaVine (Environmental Studies/Interdisciplinary Studies), and Michael Popovic (International Studies).

Coordinator for 1YC

The Coordinator for 1YC shall be appointed by the SUNY Potsdam Chief Diversity Officer and will report to the Provost and the Chief Diversity Officer or their delegates. The Coordinator for 1YC will chair all Soliya committees and carry responsibility for the successful planning, execution, and assessment of the Soliya 1YC Program. The Coordinator will receive administrative support from the Administrative Assistant of the Division for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. The Coordinator for 1YC will receive some course release and compensation to account for the additional work load and the work required over the summer.

The Coordinator for 1YC will:

- oversee all 1YC activities necessary for the development, planning, implementation, execution, and assessment of the program.
- provide the main point of contact for Soliya.
- coordinate with Campus Communication and Admissions for messaging.
- coordinate 1YC integration with the Director of the Student Success Center and the Director of the Potsdam Pathways program.
- try to achieve long-term viability of 1YC on the SUNY Potsdam campus.
- lead the efforts of the 1YC committees (i.e. development of assessment tools).
- work to ensure the establishment of a SUNY Potsdam dialog facilitation program, including facilitator recruitment among faculty, staff and students.
- develop and present dialog facilitation training for SUNY Potsdam facilitators.
- participate in the SUNY Potsdam research related to the program.
- supervise student facilitation internships.
- facilitate multiple dialog sessions each academic year.
- develop a facilitator support program/group or coaching system.
- help in the "dialog as pedagogy" training of Ways 103 faculty (tentative).

This list is not comprehensive at this point yet and will be completed as things develop.

Dialog Facilitation

Great facilitators are crucial for successful and meaningful student experiences. Facilitators provide a safe and constructive learning environment as neutral, multi-partial process leaders that do not directly determine discussion content. They are trained to support effective group communication, allowing participants to reflect upon the learning process, navigate through interpersonal dynamics, and co-create a safe space for honest discussion of difficult topics.

During the trial period, Soliya will provide most of the facilitators. SUNY Potsdam will attempt to provide 30-40 facilitators the first year and 80 facilitators the second year. In order to ensure sustainability of the program, it is crucial for SUNY Potsdam to assume some of the tasks that Soliya takes on during the trial period. One of most important aspects for the sustainability is SUNY Potsdam assuming much/all of the facilitating and much of the necessary training for facilitators. In order to ensure this, we need to provide facilitation training and we need to incentivize the facilitation work.

Facilitation Training

Facilitators are critical to the success of this program and are at the core of open, respectful, and balanced conversations in which all participants are encouraged to share their opinions and the interests that motivate their positions. Through Soliya's Facilitation Training and Practicum, students, alumni, professors, and staff can gain indispensable dialogue facilitation and conflict resolution skills.

The training sessions will include the following general structure:

1. Program Intro & Active Listening
2. Neutrality, Multipartiality & Critical Thinking
3. Identity & Difference
4. Deepening Dialogue
5. Emotions & Conflict in Dialogue
6. Challenging Group Dynamics (PC, disengaged etc)
7. Co-Facilitation Practice
8. Power Dynamics, Bias, Practice
9. Session Planning, Practice
10. Final session - Practice, final program information

Trainees meet with their training groups for two-hour weekly training sessions for a period of ten weeks (or 5x4h – we are trying to establish one training during the semester and one after the semester is over). Through discussion, peer and trainer feedback and with a deep emphasis on practice, trainees learn about conflict resolution and prevention, facilitation concepts and techniques applicable in a variety of settings and experience the challenges and advantages of online facilitation. Participants who successfully complete training are invited to facilitate 1YC dialog groups at SUNY Potsdam. All trainees who complete the training will receive a UN endorsed certificate.

To incentive participation in training, it is proposed that the training should be seen as professional development for both faculty and staff as it provides skills that will lead to better, more inclusive classrooms for faculty and better engagement with students by staff. It should be seen as a way in which campus community members can help in our goal of a more inclusive community in accordance with SUNY Potsdam’s DEI plan. If possible and in coordination with the supervisor, staff members should be allowed to use release time for the training. Faculty should receive credit for the training in their reappointment/promotion materials.

Facilitation Workload

Under the assumption of an incoming class of 700 students with an average dialog group size of 10, we will require a total of 140 (2 per group) facilitators each academic year. During the two year pilot, at least one facilitator of the co-facilitation team will be an experienced Soliya facilitator. We anticipate no more than 40 Potsdam facilitators during year 1, and no more than 80 during year two.

If we do all of this at SUNY Potsdam after the pilot period, 70 of these facilitators will be students who have completed the 1YC and the facilitator training. 70 facilitators will come from faculty and staff. Most of this labor will be needed during the summer (80% based on previous summer orientation participation rates but there is high uncertainty here). The remaining 20% will be largely covered during weeks 2-5 of the fall semester. We are currently considering a very small cohort during weeks 2-5 of the spring semester depending on General Education integration.

At this point we estimate that the facilitation of one group of dialog sessions will require approximately 25 hours of labor:

Dialog facilitation 4x2 hours	8 hours
Facilitation preparation	8 h
Set up (tech testing, initial student contact, etc.)	1 h
Meetings (beginning and end of program)	4 h
Communication with students outside of sessions	2 h
Assessment and student evaluations	1 h
Facilitator support (support group, coach)	1 h
	25 hours

In order to allow facilitators to gather experience slowly and in order to take full advantage of the facilitation expertise already existing Soliya facilitators have, we want to propose the following structure. Each facilitator only co-facilitates one dialog group during their first year. During the second year, you can co-facilitate up to two groups. It may be useful to limit the total after that to 3 groups per year.

Incentivizing Facilitation

To incentivize providing the labor involved in facilitating dialog sessions, the campus needs to largely rely on reassignment of work due to our financial situations. This should aid in using the oversupply of labor present on our campus in ways that promote retention and a positive and inclusive campus climate. Moreover, college alumni who participated in the global Soliya program may also serve as facilitators. Below is a more specific list of the incentives for each pool of potential facilitators:

Faculty: After facilitating 1YC 4 times faculty receive one course release. Faculty who cannot receive a course release (adjuncts, some faculty, particularly in Edu/Prof Studies and Crane) receive extra service compensation. Conditions for exceptions to be determined by Provost/Deans/Chairs.

Staff: When staff members facilitate 1YC during their regular work hours they receive a total of 2 days of comp. time. When staff members facilitate 1YC outside their regular work hours, they receive a total of 3 days in comp time. If comp. time is not available in their contract, staff members receive equivalent release time.

Students: When students complete both the facilitation training and facilitate at least one 1YC dialog group, they receive internship credits. In addition, students receive credentials through the Summit Program on campus if they continue to facilitate. A credit bearing academic independent study could be considered for students who want to advance further.

Alumni: When alumni facilitate in the 1YC they receive 20 hours of expert dialog training at no cost. Upon the completion of the training and one round of group facilitation, alumni receive a United Nations endorsed certificate as proof of their acquired intercultural dialog skills. In addition, alumni get access to the Soliya network and all its other dialog programs.

Facilitation Training at SUNY Potsdam

During the two year pilot period it is very important for SUNY Potsdam to acquire the expertise to establish an international facilitation program and training. This includes benefiting from Soliya's 20 year experience in this area through receiving train the trainer programs, etc.

Integration

Sessions begin online before the start of the academic year and can feed into in-person engagements as part of SUNY Potsdam Orientation. In addition, we propose the integration into the General Education Pathways Program via Ways 103 courses.

Orientation Integration

1YC will become part of the on-boarding check-list for incoming students. Students will register for Soliya through this process. All communication regarding 1YC will be included in the general communication for first years. During the initial picnic of Orientation on campus, students will

meet in their 1YC groups in person and will be able to continue their online conversation. Further orientation integration is being developed with the First-Year Student Experience Task Force.

Academic integration

1YC will become a mandatory part of the Ways 103 courses that every first-year student has to take. We are discussing different integration possibilities. At this point it seems most likely that students will complete a common graded assignment that is based on their Soliya experience. We are working with Kelly Bonnar, David Curry, and the Ways 103 faculty to develop the best possible approach. This will allow for a mechanism to ensure that all of our students participate in Soliya 1YC. If they did not complete the program during the summer, they will enroll in the fall program (weeks 2-5) due to their Ways 103 courses requirements. The students that take their Ways 103 during the spring semester can enroll in the final make up sessions during weeks 2-5.

Cost

The cost for 1YC is \$300 per student during the two-year pilot. During this time, Soliya is able to provide us with a cost reduction of \$150 per student due to external funding they were able to secure. The cost of \$150 per student will be paid from the student Orientation Fee. The cost per student is anticipated to decline when the program is scaled to more universities. We are able to reduce the cost per student further by taking on some of the work Soliya is providing during the first two years. With both aspects in place, it is highly likely that the program will be sustainable at SUNY Potsdam.

Assessment

Pre-and post-program survey tools are being created. These will be developed by the Soliya Advisory Board in cooperation with Soliya to reflect both Soliya's and SUNY Potsdam's assessment needs. In addition, other assessment tools will be created to evaluate the impact of the program.

Potential measure might include:

- Aggregate student survey and assessment results
- Retention and completion rates
- Achieving of DEI goals
- Number of joint activities, clubs, discussion groups, or other student-organized activities across demographic dividing lines
- Diversity of trained student facilitators on-campus
- Number of student initiatives to address on-campus crises and tensions through dialogue and constructive engagement across difference
- Number of student facilitators who seek to continue the program following the initial project period