

First Year Connect (1YC) Program at SUNY Potsdam

Summer 2021



1YC is a truly unique orientation program that helps SUNY Potsdam in creating a more inclusive community by building on our strength – our diversity on campus. Our goal is to improve the college experience for our students overall and especially our BIPOC students and in turn help increase our retention and aid in SUNY Potsdam’s enrollment strategy, which has translated into great sustained engagement opportunities for alumni. In addition, alumni and faculty as well as staff have reported that they see 1YC as a meaningful professional development opportunity based on the acquisition of broadly applicable dialogue facilitation skills.

“Being trained as a facilitator by Soliya and having now facilitated twice for 1YC has given me a new critical toolbox for teaching students how to actively listen and engage with each other in the classroom. The feedback I have received from Soliya in the process has been incredibly useful.”

SUNY Potsdam Faculty Facilitator – Sept 2021

Program Preparation

In our 8th year of working with Soliya to provide dialogue opportunities for our students on our campus, we are excited to have concluded the third phase of our 1YC pilot. While successfully completing the first two phases of the 1YC pilot in August 2020 and January 2021 (see previous report summary), we engaged in preparations for Phase 3 during summer 2021. Based on our enrollment of 535 in 2020/21, we asked Soliya to prepare for an incoming class of up to 500 students after consultation with Academic Affairs and Admissions. Soliya used the data collected from the two previous phases to further improve both the curriculum for students and the training of facilitators. We also engaged in additional fundraising for the program during spring 2021 and helped Soliya and Search for Common Ground raise \$120 000 from the Goldman-Sonnenfeldt Foundation. Additionally, we continued to strengthen the integration of 1YC into Potsdam Pathways’ WAYS 103 DEI courses and our overall orientation to campus. Furthermore, while Soliya is providing two of

the three parts of our facilitator training at this point, members of the 1YC committee have continued training facilitators and promoting dialogue on all levels of campus to help advance a culture change toward a more inclusive, just, skilled, and supportive campus community. 1YC is making steady progress toward this goal, which in turn will also make our campus more attractive to our diverse group of potential future students.

“Pedagogically, it has helped me help students learn to have conversations about challenging topics, and ensure that we’re getting – and really hearing – a diversity of voices”

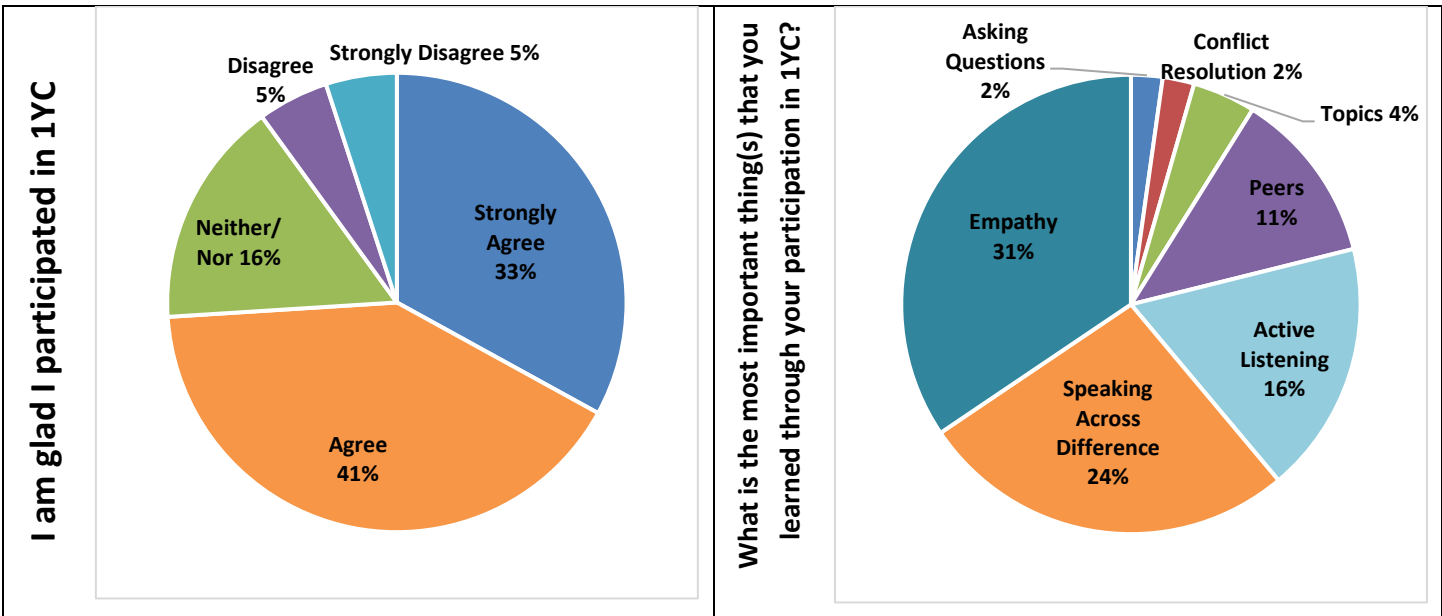
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Pilot Phase 3

Based on Pilot 1 and 2 we decided that 4 weeks (1 x 2hrs/week) starting 5 weeks before the beginning of the Fall semester seemed optimal and consequently implemented this summer’s program from July 26th to Aug 21st, 2021. Due to Soliya’s well-coordinated messaging via emails, texts, and phone calls, we achieved an enrollment rate of over 92% (385 students) of the incoming class, which impressed our colleagues from the Student Success Center who are in charge of orientation and all onboarding processes. 85% of registered students participated in the program, which is higher than attendance in our previous on-campus summer orientation. 54% of students completed the program and our weekly attendance rates ranged from 68% to 60% in weeks 1-3 but fell to 50% in week 4. Since most of the absences in week 4 were due to sports teams beginning training, we are considering starting next year’s 1YC 6 weeks before the semester begins instead.

“I think getting to talk to people who have different opinions than you and might be able to give you a new perspective on an issue is really important and i think that it helped me to learn a lot more through my peers.”

1YC Student – Aug 2021



The groups were representative of the overall class regarding race/ethnicity and gender. 40% of participating students belong to the LGBTQ+ community, which is slightly higher but not inconsistent with previous campus-wide surveys. Once data is available for the class overall, we can evaluate how representative 1YC students were when it comes to socioeconomic status and geographic location. The program was very well received by students and the core learning outcomes were achieved. Soliya did not only deliver every aspect of the program as promised, but they exceeded our expectations.

I understand someone else’s views by imagining an issue from their perspective.	85% (+11)
I have spoken out/acted to promote awareness about discrimination.	71% (+9)
I am confident about sharing feelings with others.	54% (+19)
I am comfortable being myself at this institution.	92% (+7)
I feel valued by this institution.	81% (+7)
I feel like part of a community at this institution.	80% (+10)
I have challenged media misrepresentations of other groups.	66% (+12)
% of students who answered often/very often or agree/strongly agree.	
All results are statistically significant.	

1YC helped me improve my	
active listening skills.	81%
critical thinking.	72%
communication skills across difference.	72%
teamwork and collaborative problem-solving skills.	70%
ability to ask good questions.	70%
ability to challenge stereotypes.	64%
ability to use dialogue when addressing tensions.	75%

While 74% overall (an impressively high number) are glad or very glad they participated in the program, 88% of BIPOC students agreed or strongly agreed. 64% of students said that “1YC helped me begin to build meaningful relationships with my peers at SUNY Potsdam”. Covid, race, gender, and SUNY Potsdam were the most commonly chosen topics. 40% of students said that the real-time dialogue was their favorite component while 31% liked the small group activities the best. Students have gotten to know each other, acquired valuable dialogue skills, and engaged constructively across difference. 64% of all students are very likely to recommend

1YC to incoming students next year, but there was a distinct difference based on race. A lower 55% of white students are very likely to recommend 1YC, while 70% of BIPOC students say they were very likely to do so.

Student Voices

“My 1YC experience has made me realize how everyone in society has the chance to be accepting and respectful of one another, but it is a matter of whether or not everyone chooses to do so. I am fortunate enough to be able to say that every participant in my group was extremely willing to listen to each other's stories and hardships when it comes to acceptance in the wider society. My group was incredible, from my perspective, because I think it can sometimes prove difficult to start conversations amongst young adults who have never met each other before.”

1YC Student – Aug 2021

“I learned about some stereotypes that I hadn't even known existed before these conversations. Our conversation about stereotypes made me extremely conscious of how much we all judge each other without even realizing it, and it's something I hope to improve in myself.”

1YC Student – Aug 2021

“Being able to talk to others about things like COVID and how it has impacted them and this upcoming school year helped me not to feel so alone in that I felt very nervous for changes on the campus.”

1YC Student – Aug 2021

Broader Impact of 1YC

Soliya's 1YC helped us achieve our core desired learning outcomes due to the significant amount of work invested. 1YC is the foundation for a broader set of changes we are hoping to achieve, and we can see first evidence already.

Retention	While decisions of students to return to SUNY Potsdam are certainly influenced by a variety of factors such as academic standing, financial resources, and currently Covid, it is noteworthy that the retention rate of 1YC participants was substantially higher than among their peers. While the overall retention rate for First-Years between Spring 2021 and Fall 2021 was 76%, 1YC students returned to campus at a rate of 85%. It is certainly too early to reach conclusions and a thorough analysis of more longitudinal data is necessary, but the initial results are promising.
Anti-Racism Dialogues	In an effort to improve our campus for our community members of color, 1YC has helped initiate and sustain anti-racism dialogue groups of faculty, staff, alumni, and students. As part of dialogue facilitator training, over 40 individuals participated in 10 weeks of anti-racism dialogues in groups of approximately 10 during Fall 2020. Using the Soliya dialogue model as a starting point, participants engaged in anti-racism dialogues to ensure the consciousness of facilitators to guide difficult conversations and to activate more BIPOC allies on campus. Dialogue can be a powerful tool for social justice change; however, our experience and ample of evidence in the literature underline the importance of well-skilled facilitators to lead to desired positive outcomes. We continued these sustained dialogues with approximately 20 members of campus leadership during Spring 2021 to aid in the broader dialogue-based culture change on campus.
Pathways	1YC is integrated into WAYS 103 of the Pathways Program through a common reflection on the experience because it provides the perfect starting point for the potentially difficult conversations about diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice in these classes. Multiple WAYS instructors have mentioned how helpful the 1YC participants are in their classroom. Students are much better able to engage in challenging conversations and crucial learning is aided significantly by the skills they acquire in 1YC. Just this week, another faculty member who has taught WAYS 3 times now remarked that a normally very difficult conversation about conservatism and race went over much better this semester than before because students “were being specific, made great connections, and listened to each other..... I can tell you there was definitely a difference this Fall.”
Global Connect	Soliya has organized virtual cross-cultural dialogue in the international sphere since 2001. Soliya receives funding for these dialogues from a variety of sources such as the Department of State (Stevens Initiative) and the European Union (Erasmus). Since 2014, Soliya has provided SUNY Potsdam with 50 seats in the program each semester at <u>no cost for SUNY Potsdam</u> . Over 500 of our students have gone through the program and have gained valuable cross-cultural communication skills while saving the college tens of thousands of dollars. A discontinuation of the collaboration with Soliya will doubtless put this opportunity

	in jeopardy. Without Soliya’s Global Connect Program, which all Political Science and International Studies students go through, both programs would suffer significantly, lose an edge we have over comparable programs elsewhere, and our students would become less competitive on the job market and when applying to graduate school.
Soliya Trainings	To adopt Soliya’s international cross-cultural dialogue approach to the domestic context, Soliya has worked tirelessly to ensure anti-oppression and especially anti-racist practices and trauma-informed facilitation. They developed multiple additional trainings that our SUNY Potsdam facilitators along with Soliya facilitators have attended over the course of the last academic year. Soliya has been deeply committed to SUNY Potsdam’s success from the beginning and has supported us in innumerable ways over the past 8 years.
1YC in SUNY & Beyond	The great promise 1YC holds can also be seen by two other SUNY campuses engaging with Soliya to implement the program there to also help create a more inclusive campus and attract potential students. Being the first among our peer institutions would place SUNY Potsdam in a strategically valuable position. Soliya, in cooperation with Search for Common Ground, the world’s largest peacemaking NGO, plans to repeat their success with the international program and plans to bring 1YC to over 200 campuses, just like Global Connect. It would be highly advantageous for SUNY Potsdam to be the leader of this trend. We have already been contacted by reporters from national publications who are interested in covering our program.

1YC at Potsdam – Next Steps

Starting a brand-new innovative program is always challenging and 1YC has been no different, but through the work of over 60 individuals at SUNY Potsdam and countless members of the Soliya community, we have been able to come very far in the 5 years we have been working on this program. The basic idea here is that Soliya gets us started and helps us build the resources and infrastructure necessary to run such a program. After the conclusion of the three phases of the pilot, we are now devoting all of our attention to making the transition to a fully Potsdam run program successful over the next 2 years. While a small investment will still be necessary to run the program, the cost will decline continuously during years 3 and 4 and amount to a fraction of the initial cost of setting up the program for the first time. To this end, we are in the process of implementing a credit-bearing 2-course sequence to train student facilitators. In addition, we have started creating a peer-to-peer facilitator support system, which met for the first time during this summer’s session. We have also created significant connections between Soliya facilitators and SUNY Potsdam and some of these very experienced facilitators have already indicated that they are interested in continuing to facilitate for us at no cost. We will additionally be working with our Computer Science Department this year to develop our own group selection algorithm. We have all the necessary basic aspects for the program in place and are working hard to complete this multi-year process to create a successful, sustainable, and effective program that provides a foundation for the building of a more inclusive, just, and attractive community.

“Meeting people so I don’t have to feel alone until I make friends because now, I already have some!”

1YC student – Aug 2021

“The 1YC Potsdam Peer Group provided crucial support for me as a dialogue facilitator during 1YC this summer. It’s also a vital seed in building community both for 1YC and for DEI work at Potsdam more generally: awesome people (I mean my colleagues, our students, and alumni who facilitated, as well as Mary P.) helping our students and each other develop challenging skills and grow together”

SUNY Potsdam Faculty Facilitator – Sept 2021