



VIRTUAL EXCHANGE IMPLEMENTATION MANUAL

CONNECT PROGRAM
SPRING 2026

soliya

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INTRODUCTION TO THE MANUAL



Welcome to the Soliya Connect Program and our community of Virtual Exchange implementers! Thank you for becoming actively involved and incorporating the program at your institution.

This is the most important resource for you as a Virtual Exchange implementer. Please find all major deadlines for you and your students in the calendar at the start of the manual.

This manual is designed to be a **comprehensive guide** for those who are professors or project coordinators implementing the Connect Program, offering important information and suggestions that will be helpful over the course of the semester.

We have developed the manual using feedback and comments given by implementers, facilitators, and students from previous semesters, and each implementer can incorporate those components of the manual that best fit the needs of his or her group of participants.

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HOW THE CONNECT PROGRAM WORKS



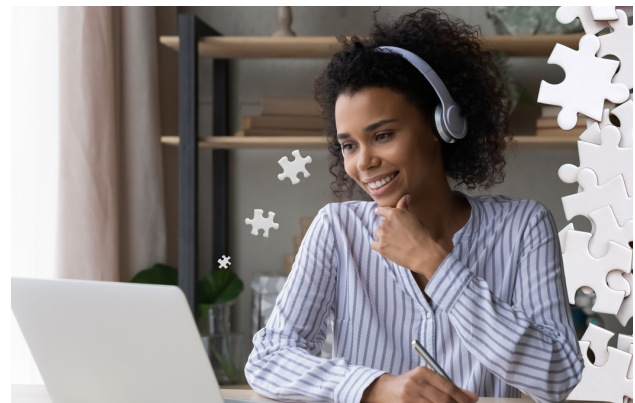
Each student is placed in a different **online group** with **approximately 10 other students** from the **Middle East, North Africa, Asia, Europe and North America**. Students will login each week for their 2-hour group sessions over a 4-week period, and each group is led by Soliya-trained facilitators who guide the activities, the discussions, and the dialogue process. During the online sessions, students can see and hear their fellow group members in real time.

Soliya has developed an online dialogue process intended to **allow students to engage in an active, dynamic and collaborative learning process**. While we have a variety of topics (outlined in the calendar below) that all online groups discuss, Soliya encourages active learning on the part of the students: asking them to identify the issues that they want to

discuss, and developing their own questions. We hope that in doing so, students will take **ownership** of their own learning process. Because we strive to ensure consistency from group to group, we have developed a list of goals for each week, and have indicated some activities and topics that are required over the course of the Program period.

During the Program, students will:

- ▶ Explore key identity-related themes and how **identity** impacts the way they engage with others.
- ▶ Connect those themes to both their personal **contexts** and the context of communication in today's world.



In addition to the required activities and discussions, students will engage in **free-flowing discussions** each week on topics they see as the most important: biases & stereotypes, gender roles, climate change, the role of the media, positive change & youth, etc.

To enable facilitators to effectively lead their groups, Soliya provides them with **an extensive toolkit with a variety of activities and resources** that they can use to enable the group to discuss both the required topics, and a broad range of optional topics. Facilitators are encouraged to **tailor** their approach to each topic based on the specific interests, knowledge base and learning styles of the students in their group.

PROGRAM CALENDAR: SPRING 2026

1 REGISTRATION PERIOD

Online Activity	Important Dates & Deadlines
Weeks of January 26th – March 16th: Implementer & Student Registration and Student Orientations	
Students begin online registration process, signing up for their dialogue group times and providing information for their student profile on the Soliya website Soliya will provide regular updates to implementers regarding their students' progress in the registration process. All students are required to watch the Connect Program Orientation Video, and we ask that you ensure they do so by March 20th at the latest, to learn about the key elements of the program, and what they can expect during their participation. If students have any questions or concerns, please ask them to contact the Soliya team at students@soliya.net. Please make clear to students that they must provide their accurate schedule availability to Soliya when they register online. They will not be able to change their group meeting time once the Program has begun. <i>If you anticipate that these deadlines will be difficult for your university to meet, please discuss this with the Program Manager immediately.</i>	Jan 26th: Course Registration Form Available. This form is crucial as it allows us to collect important information about the course or project through which your students participate in the Program. Once ready, the form link will be sent to you by the Program Manager. February 9th: Course Registration Form Due. February 20th: Student Registration Links Available. March 9th: Student Registration Due. Students should complete the online registration process by this date. It will be very difficult to accommodate students who do not meet this deadline. March 16th: Students' schedules locked. All students' schedules will be locked on March 16th, which means any students who wish to change the times they selected during their registration must do so prior to this date.
Week of March 23rd: Schedule Information Distributed	
Students will be assigned their dialogue group and meeting time, and they will be given access to their group's website Soliya will send implementers a summary of schedule assignments	March 25th: Students Notified of Schedule. Students will receive e-mails containing schedule information by this date. After students are sent their schedules, they will only have 24 hours to request any final schedule changes.

2 ONLINE DIALOGUE SESSIONS

Objectives	Online Activity & Discussion Topics
Week of March 30th: Introductions & an Exploration of Global and Social Challenges	
 To introduce students to each other, to the facilitators, and to the key topics they will be discussing throughout the Program.  To develop a positive group rapport.  To introduce the idea of dialogue and the students' role in making it successful. To enable students to develop comfort in the online medium to discuss the first set of required readings in which students are presented with expert views and global trends on what constitute the most pressing global risks and social challenges to provide a broad perspective on the topic and spark discussions on issues that are important to them.  To provide students with a sense of ownership over the group process.	Introduction to group members, the online dialogue process, and the Connect Program. What is dialogue, how does it differ from debate, or discussions? Why is it important to learn to engage with difference? What is your role in dialogue, and how can you contribute to making it successful? What do you think are the most pressing global and social challenges in the world today? What are the most pressing issues in your country / community? How do those two sets of challenges compare? How and why do different countries and regions perceive global and social challenges differently? What do you think of the issues your peers raised that were different from your own?  Readings: • Which of the global risks explored in the articles that you read this week did you agree with most? • Which did you disagree with? Why? • What do you think are the most important global and social challenges?
 Assignments & Deadlines:	
 Required Readings: Discussion this week will be based on readings for "Global and Social Challenges".	

Objectives	Online Activity & Discussion Topics
Week of April 6th: Identity & Deeper Exploration of Global Challenges	
- To allow students to explore their individual identities, and engage with issues of identity development in the context of intercultural dialogue. - To identify major issues that will be discussed over the course of the semester. - To enable students to develop comfort in the online medium. - To provide students with a sense of ownership over the group process.	Identity, Culture and Communication: - Students participate in activities that enable them to explore identity issues and share cultural information. - How have your identity and experiences affected your understanding of and perspective on these issues? - Students discuss the concept of identity threat, self-awareness, and the idea that identities are intricately related to individuals' worldviews and how people engage with one another. - Continued exploration of what students perceive to be the most pressing global challenges. - Students think about, and identify topics they want to discuss in the dialogue sessions.
Week of April 13th: Group Selected Topic	
- To allow the group to more deeply explore one or two of the issues that they identified as a global or social challenge. - To begin to build an understanding of alternate perspectives and the sources of those perspectives. - To explore the learning component activity on listening, and asking good questions, and examine how it impacts dialogue. - To empower students to engage with one another more fluidly, and ask and answer each other's questions around the topics of discussion. - To encourage differences to emerge and begin exploring the underlying emotions, assumptions and experiences that lead to these positions.	 Details about optional discussion topics are listed below the calendar. Learning Component: Listening and Asking Good Questions. Students examine the importance of listening, and work on asking good questions in an activity that promotes empathy and relationship-building amongst their peers, and enriches their communication abilities. Practicing Constructive Communication: through free-flowing dialogue and discussion of the group-selected topic, students engage around what constructive communication looks like, and practice engaging each other thoughtfully across differences. Final Project Discussion: students work with their fellow group members to decide on their Final Project topic, and collaboratively develop the opening question for their community interviews.



Assignments & Deadlines:



Final Project

Students **select the two community members for a short interview each**, conducted outside of their Week 3 session of the Connect Program. Selection guidelines are provided in **the Student Assignments document**.

Objectives

Online Activity & Discussion Topics

Week of April 20th: **Group Selected Topic**



To allow the group to **more deeply explore one or two of the issues that they identified** as a global or social challenge.



To explore the learning component activity on **critical awareness**, and examine how their values, norms and assumptions impact the dialogue process.



To encourage **students to drive the conversation**, asking one another questions and listening carefully to responses.



To **more deeply explore differences** and challenge students to **re-examine** where their positions come from.



*Details about **optional** discussion topics are **listed below** the calendar.*

Learning Component: Critical Awareness.

Students reflect on their own perspectives to gain greater awareness of the assumptions and values underlying their views, discuss the best ways to understand and engage with perspectives different from their own, and think critically about how they address differences and conflict.

Week of April 27th:

Youth Empowerment & Working for Change



To encourage participants to develop ideas about ways that they might effect **change**, and to feel increasingly motivated and empowered to work for this change.



To end the group **on a positive note**, with participants feeling that they and others learned through the dialogue process.



Recognitions Activity:

Students take the time to recognize what they learned from their peers over the course of the semester.



Working for Change: Group members formulate ideas as to what they can do individually and as a group to address the challenges they have explored over the semester at both the local level and the global scale.



Assignments & Deadlines:

Final Reflection Paper Submission & Student Evaluations

Students submit their Final Project papers to Soliya and to you by **Friday, May 1st**. If they have not already done so during their last group sessions, students must complete their online evaluations of the program by **May 3rd**.

OPTIONAL TOPICS

For Weeks 3, 4 and 5 of the Program, students are encouraged to discuss a topic they identified as most important early on in the program. We want this to be an **active learning process** for students, so their **leadership in selecting topics is important**. As such, we ask you to encourage them to think proactively about what they want to discuss.

Topics that students have frequently raised in past semesters include, but are not limited to:



The role of religion in society and in life.

Emerging and new technologies.

Immigration and integration.

Culture and stereotypes.

Media (traditional, online, social, etc.).

Environment and natural resources.

Current events.

Social movements.

Inequality.

Gender issues.

Health (public, personal, mental, etc.).



THE CURRICULUM



Participants in the Connect Program come from a wide range of backgrounds, countries and intellectual interests, ensuring that students are exposed to a variety of perspectives and opinions in their dialogue groups. **The assignments and readings are designed to delve into that experience** further by: exposing students to various ways of thinking and understanding the topic at hand, providing a common base on which group discussions will be built, and allowing students to engage their fellow participants in an in-depth exploration of a topic that is important to them.

Required Readings

During the semester, **students will be required to complete one set of readings on the following subject:** global and social challenges (to be discussed in the first week of the program, during the week of **March 30**). These readings are designed to broaden students' perspectives and deepen their knowledge of one of the most important topics covered during the semester. The topic was selected based on feedback from implementers, students, and facilitators in previous semesters.



*We recommend that Virtual Exchange implementers **integrate the readings as part of their course curriculum or project requirements** to ensure that all participating students will complete the readings prior to their sessions. Many implementers also choose to discuss the readings with their students in the classroom or in offline group meetings in advance of the week they are due, to complement the discussions in the online sessions. Prior to the start of the semester, Soliya will send the full required readings list.*

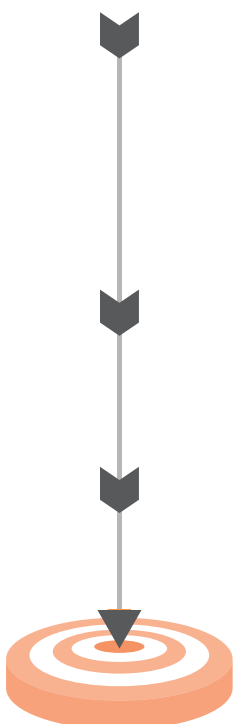


Final Project

During the Final Project, students will apply the skills and insights they've gained in the Connect Program by engaging with diverse perspectives in their local communities. Students will begin by working with their Connect group members to **select a meaningful topic and develop interview questions**.

Then, they will **select at least two members of their community to interview** outside of Week 3 of the Program.

At the end of the Final Project, **students will write a paper** in which they share an analytical summary of the perspectives gathered, reflect on how they practiced constructive dialogue in their communities, and connect this to their Soliya experience. Students should **submit one copy of their paper** to Soliya and one to you by Friday, **May 1st**.





Optional: Weekly Journal Entries

We recommend students **write weekly journal entries** during their participation in the Connect Program, and use their journal as a tool to reflect on both the content and the process of dialogue. To facilitate their reflection and encourage them to think critically about the discussions they're having with their group each week, we will share with students suggested themes and weekly focus questions. Though the weekly journal entries are not a required component of the program curriculum, **we highly recommend it** because feedback from implementers and past participants indicate that when students keep a weekly journal, it has a significant and positive impact on their overall experience.

Student Participation & Active Learning



Soliya encourages active learning on the part of the students: asking them to identify the issues that they want to discuss, and developing their own questions to address these issues. We ask that you encourage your students to see this as an opportunity to speak up, ask all the questions they have to students from other countries and other cultures, share their thoughts openly, bring up hard issues, challenge their peers, but also challenge their own assumptions, and finally, not shy away from hot or controversial topics.



*If your students feel that there are key issues that are not being discussed, please **encourage them to share their concerns with their group members and bring this to their facilitators' attention.** If your students feel like their peers in the dialogue group are holding back about a particular issue please **encourage them to take an active role in their group by asking questions about culture, politics or identity.***

IMPLEMENTER'S ROLE DURING THE CONNECT PROGRAM

SOLIYA INTEGRATION

Required Components:

The way you are integrating the Connect Program at your institution will determine the level of engagement students have with the Program outside their weekly sessions (please see recommended components, below), but we ask that you **make the following key elements of the Program required for all students who participate:**



- 1 Attendance to all 5 online dialogue sessions during the Program.
- 2 The reflection papers.

Certificate Criteria for Participants

Students who successfully complete the Connect Program will receive the Connect Program Certificate of Participation, attesting to the skills and experiences gained through their participation.

Please note the criteria for obtaining each the Certificate of Participation:

- 1 **Attend** a minimum of the Connect Program sessions **75%**
- 2 Complete and submit **the End of Semester Evaluation** by the deadline (**May, 3rd**)

Certificates will be sent electronically to eligible students by **May**.

ENSURING STUDENT COMMITMENT



Participating fully in all the components of the Connect Program requires students to spend approximately **10 hours on Program-related activities during the 5-week period**. Students who are provided with a strong incentive to participate are much more actively engaged in the Program, and are more willing to commit the time necessary to have a positive learning experience.

Thus, we ask that you make participation in the weekly dialogue sessions a graded part of the course or provide a compelling incentive to ensure that they will fully commit to being active participants in their respective groups, and to reward them for their efforts.

ATTENDANCE



Students must attend the ALL their Soliya online sessions:

full attendance, being on time and staying for the duration of the two-hour session are all critical for the success of the Program.

Student absences have a great adverse effect on the quality of the discussions in each group, and it also impacts other students who feel they have made an effort to attend their sessions, while their peers haven't. We therefore ask that you **make attendance and timeliness mandatory, and where possible**, part of your students' grade or final assessment.

Please note: *Because the Program only runs for 5 weeks – meaning that students who have been absent for 2 sessions have missed almost half of the Program – 2 unexcused absences (i.e. there was no official holiday and the student was absent) leads to the student being dropped out of the Program.*

PARTICIPATING INSTITUTIONS (TBA)

There will be about **600 students** from approximately **30 partners** in **15 countries** participating across the various Connect Program iterations in the Spring 2026 semester. We will be finalizing the list of partner institutions over the coming weeks.

Institutions include the following for the Spring 2026 semester:

- 📍 Al Akhawayn University, Morocco
- 📍 American Cornersin Tunisia, Tunisia
- 📍 American Language Centersin Marrakesh & Tangier, Morocco
- 📍 American University in Cairo, Egypt
- 📍 An Najah National University, Palestine
- 📍 Bethlehem University, Palestine
- 📍 Bayti for Development, Syria
- 📍 Chimie Paris Tech, France
- 📍 Claflin University, South Carolina, USA
- 📍 École Nationale des Ponts et Chaussées, France
- 📍 Esprit Business School, Tunisia
- 📍 Forman Christian College, Pakistan
- 📍 HU University of Applied Sciences Utrecht, Netherlands
- 📍 Jesuit Worldwide Learning, Iraq
- 📍 Lebanese American University, Lebanon
- 📍 Lebanese International University, Lebanon
- 📍 University of Padova, Italy
- 📍 Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore
- 📍 Morgan State University, Maryland, USA
- 📍 Northwestern Michigan College, Michigan, USA
- 📍 Oakland Community College, Michigan, USA
- 📍 Purchase College, State University of New York, New York, USA
- 📍 Soran University, Iraq
- 📍 Stockton University, New Jersey, USA
- 📍 Université de Paris Saclay, France
- 📍 University of Benghazi, Libya
- 📍 University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland, USA
- 📍 University of Texas San Antonio, Texas, USA
- 📍 Western Kentucky University, Kentucky, USA

For a full list of all Connect Program partners, please visit our [Connect Program Partners](#) page.

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THANK YOU

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