

OVERVIEW:

In summer 2020, Soliya and Search for Common Ground launched First Year Connect (1YC), our pilot program bringing incoming first-year and transfer college students in the U.S. together before the start of classes.

Guided by trained facilitators, students discussed issues related to identity, the personal impact of the pandemic, community values, and current events in small groups. At a time of heightened division in the U.S., we provided the 1YC participants with a virtual space for human connection, an opportunity to engage over their own lived experiences and across lines of difference. We ran three rounds of the program between July 2020 and January 2021, with each round including eight hours total of live meeting time over three or four sessions.

Program Goals:

Community building	Generate a sense of community across campus by building a culture of mutual respect and solidarity across traditional lines of difference
Intergroup communication skills	Enable students to practice empathy, acknowledging each other’s humanity through an exploration of shared and diverse experiences and feelings. Create a culture of constructive discourse that will make every student feel heard and respected
Critical thinking and awareness	Activate emotional awareness and examine underlying assumptions, values, biases, social norms, and experiences that shape perspectives and positions
Civic engagement	Inspire participants to instigate positive change by addressing local challenges with newfound skills and attitudes

THE CONTEXT: AN UNPRECEDENTED TIME

The first year of our pilot took place in the midst of one of the most divisive presidential elections in recent history, a global pandemic, and the killing of George Floyd, which sparked a summer of protests for racial justice. First Year Connect became more relevant than ever, providing a space for participants to discuss current issues in a safe, constructive environment.

Over 500 students participated in 1YC during the first year of the pilot.

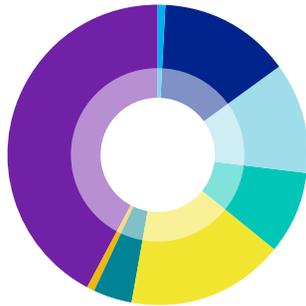
Each group was comprised of 8-12 students reflective of the diversity of the campus across demographic criteria such as gender identity, race and ethnicity, and socio-economic status. All groups had two dialogue facilitators who were carefully paired together to complement each other's abilities as facilitators and represent diverse backgrounds. Facilitators provided a constructive learning environment as neutral, multi-partial process leaders who would not influence discussion content. They were trained to support effective group communication, allowing participants to reflect upon the learning process, navigate through interpersonal dynamics, and co-create a safer and brave space for honest discussion of difficult topics.

IMPACT:

DEMOGRAPHICS:

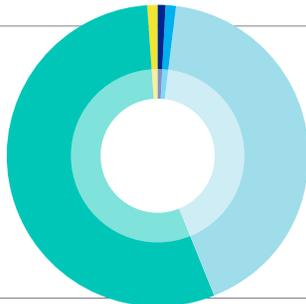
RACE/ETHNICITY:

- Arab/MENA: 1%
- Asian/Pacific Islander: 14%
- Black: 12%
- Hispanic: 9%
- Multiracial: 17%
- No response: 4%
- Other: 1%
- White: 42%



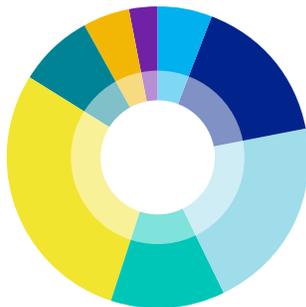
GENDER:

- Gender non-conforming: 1%
- No response: 1%
- Man: 42%
- Woman: 55%
- Other: 1%



PARENT'S EDUCATION:

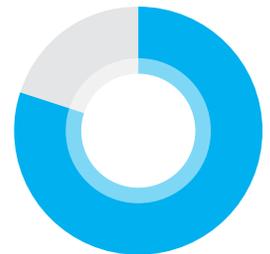
- Associate's: 6%
- Bachelor's: 16%
- Doctoral: 21%
- High School: 12%
- Master's: 29%
- No response: 8%
- Some college: 5%
- Some K-12: 3%



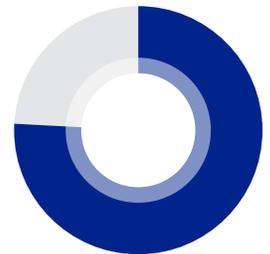
Student Response:

Overall, the program had a positive impact on students who participated.

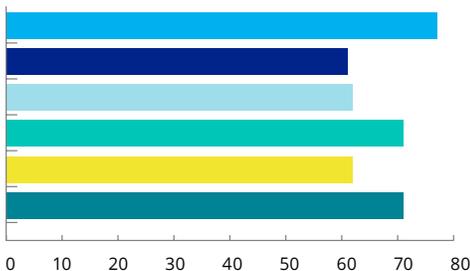
80% of students who attended the entire program said they were glad to have participated.



76% of students who attended all program sessions said that 1YC helped build their communication skills across differences.



74% of students who attended all program sessions said that 1YC helped them begin to build meaningful relationships with their peers.



- 77% of students said that 1YC helped them improve their active listening skills.
- 61% said it helped them improve their ability to ask questions.
- 62% said it helped them improve their teamwork skills.
- 71% said it helped them improve their critical thinking skills.
- 62% said it helped them improve their collaboration problem solving skills, and
- 71% said it helped them improve their awareness skills.



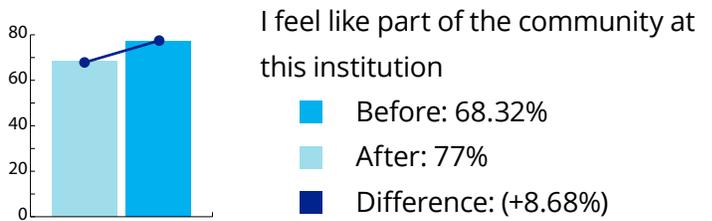
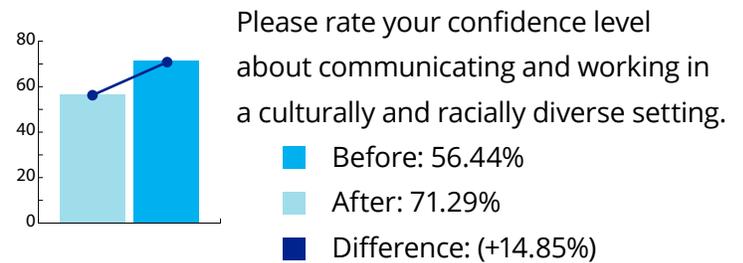
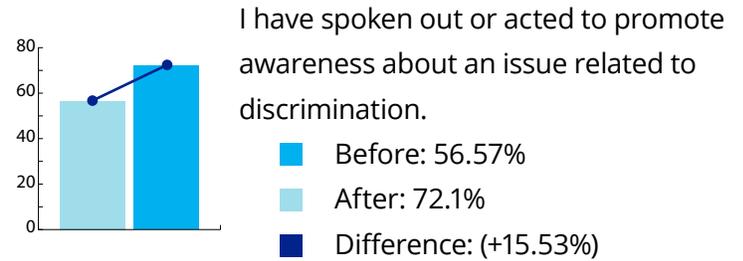
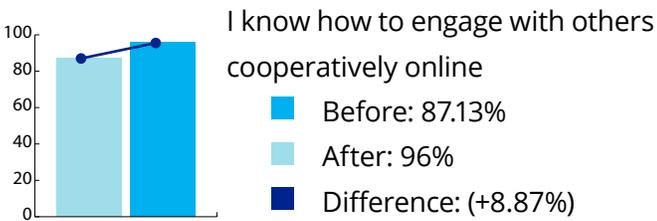
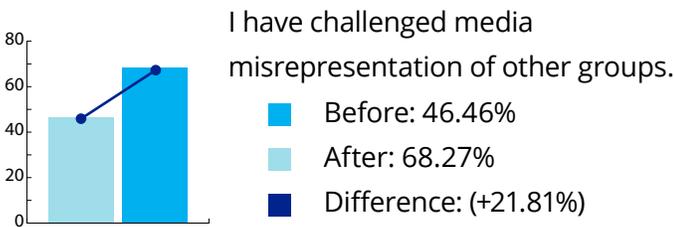
MOST IMPORTANT THING LEARNED FROM 1YC (SUMMER):
41% of students said dialogue skills,
26% of students said empathy was the most important.



MOST IMPORTANT THING LEARNED FROM 1YC (JANUARY):
31% of students said active listening,
28% of students said empathy.

Student Response:

Students showed significant improvement on the following measures:



One student exemplified this growth in their survey responses. After the first session, they wrote, "I did not enjoy the session today. I found it very awkward and invasive...I don't feel like I really learned anything about the other people in my group..." But after the last session, they had completely changed their perspective, writing, "...our group opened up to each other and we had great dialogue and got to know each other better. I think the most important thing I learned was how to actively listen to others...At the end of the day, we are all humans and most of the time we have more in common than we realize. Dialogue helps find that common ground so that you can build upon what you know and see things from a different perspective."

Other students shared that they learned "how to talk to people calmly who disagree with [them]" and "how to use dialogue to talk about difficult topics."

Many students emphasized the positive social interactions that came out of 1YC, with 70% of participants saying that meeting peers was the best part of 1YC. A student shared that they "really enjoyed meeting new people especially because [they] all go to the same college, and probably wouldn't have really interacted like this if [they] saw one another on campus."

“ I loved being able to interact with people that I might not have normally associated with. It broadened my perspective and views.”

- IYC participant

“ 1YC has helped me better understand personal and social assumptions about differences by having my group discuss our individual differences.”

- IYC participant

Faculty & Administrator Response:

One seasoned communications professor's story demonstrates the impact of 1YC: After a few weeks into the spring semester, the professor decided that he wanted to push his students to begin to have conversations on more difficult topics. To open up his first class of the day, he suggested that the class have a conversation about the events of January 6. Immediately everyone fell silent, and more and more students turned off their cameras.

During his next class that day, the professor decided to take a different approach. He opened by explaining to the students the importance of having conversations on these kinds of topics but that in the previous class the students had completely disengaged. He asked his students what the group might be able to do to have these kinds of conversations. Immediately, one student suggested that the class do “what we did in 1YC”, recommending that they set group agreements, break up into breakout rooms, allow people to take a step back if they felt deeply uncomfortable, etc. The other students who had gone through 1YC chimed in in support of these ideas. The class put into practice these suggestions and was able to have a constructive and engaging conversation on the events of January 6.

Reflecting on this experience, the faculty member expressed that the approach the student suggested was the most effective way he's seen to engage his students on difficult conversations.

Faculty and administrators also appreciated the facilitation training they received prior to 1YC. A professor shared that they “found it to be really intensive, extensive, and worthwhile.”

“ The three metrics for change in higher education are 1) leadership engagement and buy-in, 2) faculty engagement, 3) integration with curriculum and programming. We have all three [...] for First Year Connect.”

- Dean of participating school

“ 2020 was so dark. 1YC was one of the positive lights.” - Professor at participating school

“ At this current moment in time, if we do anything for our students here...it should be First Year Connect” - Administrator at participating school