

**Abstract**

Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) is a form of virtual exchange that institutions can use to internationalize the curriculum and foster internationalization at home. COIL promises more equitable and inclusive ways to achieve internationalization and global learning for all students. Even though COIL has existed for the last 20 years, it became truly widespread only during the COVID-19 pandemic. To explore its full potential, accurate implementation and more evidence is needed.

COIL as a Way to Enhance Internationalization: Balancing Evidence and Proliferation

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In a Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) arrangement, faculty and students from higher education institutions across different countries and cultures collaborate to cocreate and implement a course. While a full course can be implemented via COIL, COIL components typically last for five to eight weeks. In a typical COIL module, students share course contents, jointly participate in class discussions, and work on projects together. Working groups intentionally comprise students from different institutions to foster intercultural dialogue and develop students' intercultural competences.

As the design and implementation of COIL rely on technologies and do not require travel by faculty or students, the COIL format is cost-effective, flexible, and less carbon-intensive than traditional student mobility. It can entail both synchronous and asynchronous forms of learning, can be offered for credit or as a cocurricular activity, and can be implemented in any academic discipline both on graduate or undergraduate level.

COIL is highly collaborative and follows a bottom-up approach. It offers an opportunity for students and teachers to compare and contrast local and global knowledge, experiences, and teaching and learning methods, while also enhancing their global awareness. Although there are special administrative offices at some institutions that support professors in creating COIL modules, the faculty members designing and teaching the course are the main actors who work on the course independently yet together with their international counterparts.

Proliferation of COIL

COIL was first initiated by the [State University of New York \(SUNY\)](#) approximately 20 years ago. However, for most of the ensuing period, the practice had not been widespread. Border closures and travel restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic propelled COIL utilization and increased its significance, but also enabled reinterpretation. An online [directory](#) of institutions participating in COIL identifies 258 institutions in 40 different

countries worldwide that offer COIL modules, but this information is likely under-reported. Even though institutions started implementing COIL as early as 2006, approximately two-thirds (160) dived into COIL in 2019 or later.

Despite its potential, COIL largely remains a practice for higher-income contexts. While the aforementioned directory does not use regional labels consistently, some trends are evident. For example, the institutions implementing COIL include 115 in North America and 43 in Europe, while only four in Africa. Latin America presents a counterexample, with 80 institutions, if Central and South America are included. In this region, organizations like the Association of Catholic Universities in Latin America and the Caribbean (ODUCAL) and the Mexican Association for International Education (AMPEI) have promoted cooperation and training on this methodology.

With 92 institutions, the United States has the largest number of COIL programs among the 258 institutions documented. The fact that the United States has the highest number of institutions implementing COIL is not surprising, given that the format originated in that country. These numbers, however, also show that there are very few COIL-implementing institutions in less-resourced regions, which indicates that not all countries and regions have the necessary resources to implement COIL courses.

With the proliferation of COIL courses, the amount of academic literature and analysis of COIL's effectiveness and impact has also increased. Research findings have been generally positive, suggesting that COIL fosters the development of students' intercultural competences. It also seeks to prompt students who did not plan to do so to participate in study abroad or exchange programs. Overall, students assess COIL experience positively and are willing to take more COIL courses. However, it is notable that single case-studies and self-reports constitute a large volume of the research.

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COIL and Internationalization of Higher Education

Although COIL is often pursued by individual faculty members, it can also be used more strategically as a form of institutional internationalization. It can be utilized to foster internationalization at home, curricular internationalization, and internationalization for society.

Physical mobility is insufficient from the point of view of promoting internationalization because only a small proportion (about 1 percent) of the student population participates. Even in the United States and the European Union, where the proportion is about 10 percent, students with disabilities, students who have to work to support their study, or those with family obligations cannot develop internationalized learning outcomes if such outcomes can only be achieved via physical mobility. Internationalization at home initiatives, like COIL, can help render internationalization strategies more inclusive for all, even though the benefits of COIL are also unevenly distributed.

By supporting intercultural exchange without the need for travel and by introducing students to more geographically diverse regions, COIL mitigates some environmental impacts. It also helps compensate for the still unequally high flows from the Global South to the Global North, which reestablish the hegemony of the West and of the English language. The technological shift that happened in teaching and learning during the pandemic did not bring about more equality in higher education around the world since different countries and different universities within these countries had unequal access to technology, as well as an unequal level of preparation and readiness for online teaching and learning. The same challenges impact COIL implementation, as COIL also requires adequate financial, time, and professional development resources. Resource-rich countries and institutions are better equipped with the necessary IT infrastructure, digital competencies, as well as financial and human resources, to offer COIL experiences to their students.

A Balancing Act

As some universities rush to resume in-person internationalization, it is important not to abandon promising practices, such as COIL. This approach can give opportunities to a higher number of students and faculty and, more importantly, to a different student population to gain international and intercultural understandings, and help institutions make their internationalization practices more comprehensive and inclusive.

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While a certain level of overlap between enthusiastic early adopters of COIL and researchers on the topic can be anticipated, it is important to systematically and independently study COIL's effectiveness. As COIL has become very popular, it is important to avoid turning it into a fad or trend, and therefore careful implementation and differentiation from other approaches is important. COIL is grounded in internationalization of the curriculum, but there are other approaches to virtual exchange that do not require being embedded within a course; likewise, other forms of virtual internationalization are gaining attention. COIL cannot replace physical mobility since the latter offers experiences that a single or several COIL courses cannot substitute. Therefore, COIL can be instead combined with in-person mobility to achieve better results. Some examples of hybrid study abroad programs already merge COIL and in-person components and show promising results. ▲