

The Global Columbia Collaboratory: ESD impact through Virtual Exchange

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In the summer of 2020, responding to the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, Columbia University's Center for Undergraduate Global Engagement (UGE) acted on the opportunity that going fully remote offered to the field of study abroad by creating a virtual global engagement program framed by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The "Global Columbia Collaboratory" is a not-for-credit learning framework through which students deepen their understanding of the SDGs, hear from content experts and practitioners on specific global challenges, and then collaborate with each other and local NGOs to highlight efforts in advancing specific SDGs. It is a higher education program linked to education for sustainable development (ESD) that provides teaching and learning, as well as community engagement.

Offering the Global Columbia Collaboratory virtually allows UGE to reach students who might otherwise not be able to access global learning experiences tied to the SDGs. It is axiomatic that a majority of undergraduate students are not studying abroad or engaging in global experiences. A report by Dr. Laura Engle for IIE Generation Study Abroad highlights that while more students are participating in study abroad than ever before, it is still the case that fewer than 10% of undergraduates will engage in study abroad. Thus, "enhancing pathways of access to study abroad for all students remains an essential objective"¹ among higher education institutions. With this reality in mind, UGE included virtual global opportunities in their strategic plan as a way to address the challenge of underrepresentation. When students were repatriated home midway through their study abroad semesters due to the pandemic, UGE and university leadership prioritized this strategic goal, and understood it as a pivotal moment in which to incorporate the SDGs into UGE programming. As the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) stated in their 2020 guide, "Accelerating Education for the SDGs (ESDG) in Universities, "By expanding and mainstreaming ESGDs as part of a higher educational

¹ Laura Engle, "Underrepresented Students in US Study Abroad: Investigating Impacts", *IIE Research and Policy Brief Series*, no. 1 (October 2017): 4.

experience, universities can respond and adapt to the needs of our “new normal”². Thus, the Global Columbia Collaboratory was created.

The SDGs Provide the Program Framework

“The SDGs themselves recognize the importance of building the knowledge and capacity of different sectors, and learners in general...”³ and are inherently interdisciplinary, like the Collaboratory itself. The SDSN guide highlights several elements⁴ of Education for Sustainable Development Goals that align with how the Collaboratory was designed and continues to evolve:

- Cross-cutting skills and ‘key competencies’ that are relevant to the general education of all learners in addressing the SDGs
- A basic “cross-cutting” understanding of key sustainable development issues
- An understanding of the SDG framework and how it can be used to address long-standing and intractable sustainable development challenges
- Profession-specific knowledge and skills
- Mindsets to inspire and empower learners to want to create positive change
- Networks that require extensive collaboration within and across sectors

In addition, the UGE team referenced the American Association of Colleges and Universities Global Learning Value Rubric⁵ and Intercultural Knowledge and Competence Value Rubric⁶ when designing the Collaboratory’s student learning outcomes: to enhance knowledge, skills, and competencies in values such as global self-awareness, understanding global systems, applying knowledge to contemporary global contexts and social justice.

Components of the Global Columbia Collaboratory

The Collaboratory is composed of undergraduate students from all three undergraduate schools at Columbia University (Columbia College, School of General Studies, and School of Engineering) as well as students from universities around the world, representing over 50 academic majors and 45+ countries. Collaboratory programs are offered in partnership with the Columbia Global Centers and other entities such as Columbia World Projects and the Sustainable Development Solutions Network. Additionally, we connect with NGOs that are addressing the theme of the Collaboratory in their local context.

Upon joining the Collaboratory, students enter an interactive online ecosystem to (a) expand their global network of like minded peers; (b) reflect on and exchange perspectives related to a series of global seminars that map to the SDGs; and (c) collaborate with each other on a project

² Sustainable Development Solutions Network, “Accelerating Education for the SDGs in Universities: A guide for universities, colleges, and tertiary and higher education institutions” September 2020): VI.

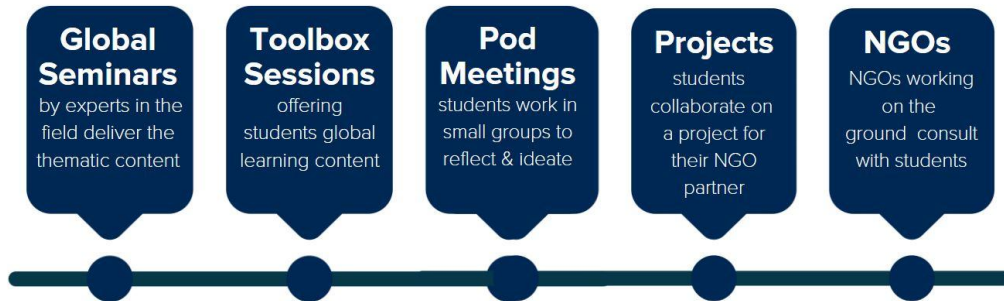
³ Ibid., 4.

⁴ Ibid., 11-12.

⁵ Association of American Colleges and Universities. 2009. “Global Learning VALUE Rubric.” <https://www.aacu.org/initiatives/value-initiative/value-rubrics/value-rubrics-global-learning>.

⁶ Association of American Colleges and Universities. 2009. “Intercultural Knowledge and Competence VALUE Rubric.” <https://www.aacu.org/initiatives/value-initiative/value-rubrics/value-rubrics-intercultural-knowledge-and-competence>.

designed to benefit the needs of the NGO. We offer global seminars and curriculum that highlight a theme related to an SDG (or interrelated SDGs) and create small groups (“pods”) where students reflect on the seminars and ideate a project for the NGO with whom they are partnered. Throughout, students are encouraged to draw linkages between their global seminar learning, the Collaboratory global learning content, their peer-to-peer collaboration, and the on-the-ground-work of their partner NGO.



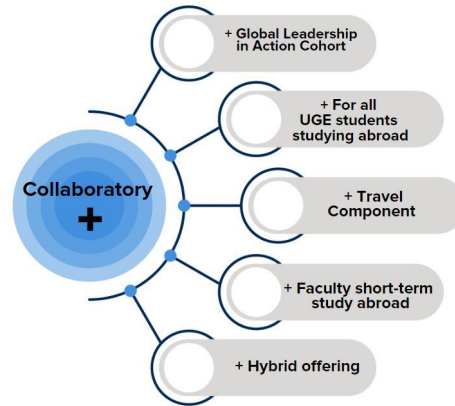
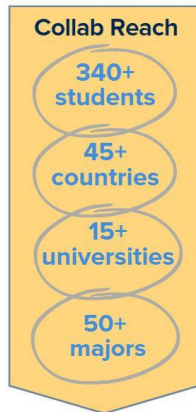
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Case Study: The Amazon Region We Want Collaboratory

For our summer 2022 Collaboratory, we partnered with the Columbia Global Center in Rio de Janeiro, the Sustainable Development Solutions Network, and the Science Panel of the Amazon. Students attended (synchronously or asynchronously) four global seminars, focused on the theme “The Amazon Region We Want,” that introduced the complexity of protecting the Amazon ecosystem. Guided by the 17 targets outlined in the SDGs, students learned from experts in the field, local practitioners, and Amazonian scientists that the Amazon we want involves not only climate action, but clean water and sanitation, responsible consumption and production, reduced inequalities, etc. While this can feel overwhelming, a key component of the Collaboratory is to facilitate students’ action-based learning through collaborating with an NGO on an awareness campaign project designed to fit the NGOs’ organizational needs. Students are able to learn about localized solutions to the larger global challenge and see how the SDGs can be applied for positive outcomes.

Progress and Challenges

The establishment of the Global Columbia Collaboratory demonstrates UGE’s progress in bridging significant barriers related to physical student mobility, even before the COVID-19 pandemic. Over 300 students have benefited from participating in the Collaboratory and its ESD framework since its inception in summer 2020. Additionally, with the success of the Collaboratory, UGE has developed several variations of the Collaboratory model, thereby increasing its reach and impact. The most exciting of these iterations is the “Collaboratory for All” model in which any student that participates in a UGE program (up to 200 annually) will automatically be exposed to the SDGs through being placed in this Collaboratory model.



The challenges lie in maximizing student engagement in the program, improving students' connection to and understanding of the SDGs, and deepening the Collaboratory's relationships with NGOs. As a not-for-credit program with a limited time commitment requirement, the challenge becomes keeping students dedicated to the program offerings. Currently, students are required to attend two one-hour synchronous sessions and devote an additional 1 - 2 hours of effort a week. Some students have expressed interest in a more robust and challenging Collaboratory model, similar to an internship or research fellowship, an option that would fit well with UGE's commitment to ESD. A second challenge is how to continually tighten the global learning curriculum and ways in which the SDG framework is applied. Fortunately, with each Collaboratory offering, the team is able to learn what is most effective and how to adjust for improved learning outcomes. Finally, while the action-based component of collaborating with NGOs has been essential to student learning, especially in terms of seeing how the SDGs can successfully be realized, we need to continue to foster our relationships with these partner organizations in order to maximize the benefits for them and our students.

In Summary

UNESCO has defined ESD as giving learners “the knowledge, skills, values and agency to address interconnected global challenges including climate change, loss of biodiversity, unsustainable use of resources, and inequality. It empowers learners of all ages to make informed decisions and take individual and collective action to change society and care for the planet.”⁷ Columbia University's Center for Undergraduate Global Engagement (UGE), when faced with the global pandemic's impact on student mobility, turned to ESD and implemented an idea it had included in their strategic plan: a not-for-credit virtual global engagement program framed by the UN Sustainable Development Goals. By launching the Global Columbia Collaboratory, UGE created a platform that has contributed to progress being made in support of education for sustainable development and provided a virtual learning model that can be iterated to multiply their ESD efforts and reach.

⁷ “What you Need to Know About Education for Sustainable Development”, UNESCO, last modified March 13, 2023, <https://www.unesco.org/en/education-sustainable-development/need-know>.