

## Expanding Global Health Competencies without Travel: The COIL Approach

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### Description

The evolution of education in the health professions has been significantly influenced by globalization, technological innovation and a growing emphasis on inter-professional collaboration. One model that exemplifies this convergence is Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), a pedagogy that fosters intercultural dialogue and academic collaboration between students and faculty in different countries through online platforms. In the context of health professions education, COIL presents a compelling opportunity to enrich learning, develop global competencies and foster cross-cultural understanding skills that are increasingly essential in an interconnected world of healthcare delivery.

Unlike traditional study-abroad programs, COIL allows for equitable access to international collaboration without the physical, financial, or logistical barriers typically associated with global experiences. It democratizes global health education by bringing students from different countries into virtual classrooms where they engage in shared learning tasks, discussions and problem-solving. These virtual exchanges expose learners to diverse healthcare systems, cultural values and professional norms, allowing them to compare and reflect on different approaches to patient care, public health and medical ethics.

Health professions education is uniquely suited to benefit from COIL initiatives. The profession demands not only clinical expertise but also cultural competence, adaptability and teamwork across borders. Through collaborative online learning, medical, nursing, pharmacy and allied health students can work together on simulated case studies, global health challenges, or inter-professional care scenarios. This encourages them to navigate language differences, time zones and communication styles mirroring the complexity of modern healthcare environments.

Moreover, COIL strengthens institutional partnerships between universities in high-, middle- and low-income countries. It encourages a two-way exchange of knowledge and mutual respect, avoiding the often-criticized unidirectional flow of expertise from the Global North to the Global South. Instructors co-develop syllabi, design assessment strategies and co-facilitate sessions, fostering professional development and capacity-building. These collaborations also set the stage for future research, faculty exchange and curriculum development beyond the scope of a single course.

Despite its clear benefits, the integration of COIL into health professions education is not without challenges. Variability in technological infrastructure, language proficiency and curriculum alignment can limit the effectiveness of such programs. Faculty may require additional support and training in digital pedagogy and cross-cultural facilitation. Institutions must also address issues of scheduling, student engagement and assessment in a way that respects the academic standards of all participating partners.

Another concern lies in ensuring that COIL experiences are meaningfully embedded within the curriculum rather than treated as add-ons. For COIL to have a lasting impact on students' attitudes and professional development, the experiences must be intentional, reflective and linked to learning outcomes. Without careful integration, the risk is that such programs become tokenistic or superficial, failing to deliver the potential intercultural competencies.

Nevertheless, the potential outweighs the hurdles. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the adoption of virtual learning platforms and proven that high-quality, interactive and collaborative learning can be achieved online. COIL takes this a step further by making internationalization at home a reality for students who may never have the chance to travel. It also aligns well with the goals of global health education, social accountability and the development of compassionate, culturally sensitive practitioners.

Moving forward, academic institutions should invest in COIL not only as an educational tool but as a strategic asset. This includes building institutional frameworks to support COIL initiatives, incentivizing faculty participation and evaluating the impact of these programs on student learning and career readiness. Accrediting bodies and professional associations can also play a role by recognizing international and intercultural collaboration as a core component of professional competency.

In conclusion, collaborative online international learning offers an innovative and inclusive pathway to globalize health professions education. It prepares future healthcare providers to think globally, act locally and communicate effectively across cultural boundaries. As healthcare continues to evolve into a more interdisciplinary and globalized field, COIL stands out as a necessary and forward-looking educational strategy that deserves greater attention and investment.