

## Around Campus

# Connecting with the World

Almost every academic year since 2017-2018, members of the Boston College community have had the opportunity to immerse themselves in a unique real-time conversation with people in far-flung places across the world—ranging from refugee camps to schools to high-tech hubs. And once again, the Global Engagement Portal has come to campus to help make the planet seem just a little smaller, say organizers, and more connected.

The portal, a shipping container converted into a videoconferencing chamber, one of several dozen designed by Shared Studios and made available around the world, arrived on the Plaza at O'Neill Library October 23 and will be there until November 16.

Other current portals are in or near an internally-displaced persons camp in Iraqi Kurdistan; two of the world's largest refugee settlements, one in Bangladesh and another in Uganda; a digital culture museum in Mexico City; an environmental conservation organization in Barbados; a public arts/social enterprise hub in Rwanda; an innovative high-tech/indigenous knowledge academy in Mali; and locations in Brazil, South Africa, Ethiopia, and Nigeria.

Real-world dynamics sometimes force changes in the program, BC organizers note: A portal that had been placed in Gaza City was shut down because of the Israel-Hamas conflict; its curator had to relocate when her apartment was destroyed.

Portal sessions last about 50 minutes apiece, and can accommodate six to eight participants. Multiple sessions can be booked, back-to-back or on different dates; walk-in sessions also are available [go to [bc.edu/bc-web/schools/mcas/sites/isp/projects/global-engagement.html](https://bc.edu/bc-web/schools/mcas/sites/isp/projects/global-engagement.html)].

"I have found that conversations in the

portal help to humanize the distant other in a powerful and memorable way," said Erik Owens, a professor of the practice in theology and director of the International Studies Program, one of nine University sponsors for the portal program at BC. "Sometimes we've hosted encounters that are unforgettable because they are so unique: a session where people on each side of the portal take turns performing a song and explaining why it's meaningful to them; or where both sides push a table toward the video screen and share a meal at what looks like a dinner table extending from Chestnut Hill to Kigali [Rwanda].

"I definitely leave these conversations feeling a personal connection to the people I'm speaking with; the conversations can be inspirational, educational, and challenging, but I always leave with a greater sense of empathy for the perspective of the people I'm speaking with."

BC undergraduates play an important role in the portal program by curating sessions—assisting BC groups in getting used to the portal, introducing them to the remote participants, and helping initiate conversations. Olivia Absey-Allen '27 led a discussion in which students from the BC Sustainability Council spoke with a representative from an ecological preserve in Barbados and learned about her work. She also curated a session in which teaching assistants from the Lynch School of Education and Human Development talked with IT experts in Mexico City.

Said Absey-Allen, "It can be a bit challenging to get the conversation flowing in the beginning, but as the session goes on, I can see both groups getting comfortable with each other. It was so interesting to talk with the Mexico City group about technology, especially how it both divides us



A session in the Global Engagement Portal last fall. The portal is on campus through November 16, part of Boston College's observance of International Education Weeks.

PHOTO BY ERIK OWENS

and connects us. Without technology, we wouldn't be able to participate in these dialogues with people from around the world."

Assistant Professor of the Practice Joshua Snyder (Theology), director of BC's Faith, Peace, and Justice minor, and his students interacted with representatives from an organization in South Africa that focuses on empowering young adults through creative expression, art, and culture. Snyder said his group heard about the pervasive legacy of apartheid in South Africa and the challenges young adults face: "The crippling levels of poverty, unemployment and HIV rates were shocking for our students.

"In my courses we talk a lot about the power of solidarity through proximity, which is the ability to see another's cause as your own by meeting with others and listening to their lived experiences," said Snyder. "The essential first step is for students to have an encounter with another culture.

Through listening and mutual dialogue, they are then in a better position to take up the causes and concerns of others by being allies and advocates. I think the students had a powerful experience. This is obviously only a first step, but through encounter their perspectives and worldviews become more expansive."

Sometimes, the revelations these talks yield are more personal, but no less deeply felt, as Vincent Sablich '24 found when speaking with two Congolese refugees in Uganda about Maitre Gims, a musical artist from the Congo of whom Sablich is an avid fan. "Music allows people from all backgrounds and experiences to connect heart to heart and soul to soul. I think this highlights what it means to be a global citizen."

*The Global Engagement Portal is presented as part of Boston College's observance of International Education Weeks [see [bc.edu/iew](https://bc.edu/iew)]*

—Sean Smith