



LEARNING BRIEF: ALUMNI ENGAGEMENT

In accordance with guidance from the Office of Management and Budget, the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs' (ECA) Monitoring, Evaluation, Learning, and Innovation (MELI) Unit has developed a multi-year Learning Agenda. Through this Learning Agenda, ECA will undertake a series of learning activities to ensure that its programming is evidence-informed, relevant, dynamic, and responsive. As evidence is gathered through these learning activities, the MELI will develop summary learning briefs to share emerging evidence and lessons learned on specific learning agenda questions.

This learning brief presents emerging evidence related to alumni engagement, a critical component of achieving long-term program goals and larger Department of State public diplomacy goals.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Engaging alumni in programming enables ECA to meet a variety of alumni needs.** Not only can this sustain connections with alumni themselves, it may also facilitate networking opportunities and support professional development for current participants and alumni alike.
- As alumni transition through new career stages, **their professional and academic interests and needs evolve**; ECA's alumni engagement efforts therefore need to engage alumni at each of these different stages in life.
- **Mentorship** stands out across evaluations as an avenue for **involving alumni in program activities** while providing alumni with networking and professional development opportunities.
- ECA programs can increase the likelihood that participants will stay engaged post-program when **opportunities to do so are presented early in their exchange experience.**



INTRODUCTION

Supporting ECA alumni is critical to achieving long-term program goals and larger Department of State public diplomacy goals. In an effort to deepen learning from its recent evaluations on the best ways to engage alumni, the MELI Unit reviewed 11 evaluations along with their corresponding action plans and “Evaluation Matters” case studies to synthesize cross-cutting findings. The MELI Unit selected evaluations for this synthesis based on their recency – that is, evaluations that concluded between 2018 and 2021 – and their relevance. The selected evaluations incorporate data collected from ECA alumni¹ and inquire about alumni outcomes through their evaluation questions.²

This brief presents several cross-cutting findings related to alumni engagement that the MELI Unit identified through this effort.

It also includes added detail and examples gathered from across the bureau in a MELI-hosted Learning Seminar. The Seminar was an opportunity for program teams to review the draft findings, provide necessary context and nuance, and share cross-program ideas sparked by the findings. These findings help to answer questions in [ECA Learning Agenda](#) Question 5 and several of its corresponding sub-questions, which consider the types of post-program engagements that expand the impact of alumni, increase engagement with Posts, and sustain connections made during exchange programs and public engagement activities.

1. Academy of Women Entrepreneurs, 2021
2. Alumni Engagement Innovation Fund, 2019
3. Career Connections, 2021
4. Hubert H. Humphrey Fellowship, 2018
5. International Writing Program, 2020
6. Mandela Washington Fellowship, 2020
7. National Security Language Initiative for Youth, 2020
8. Professional Fellows Program, 2020
9. Sports Visitor Program, 2020
10. TechGirls, 2021
11. TechWomen, 2021

ECA Learning Agenda Question 5:

In what ways do alumni of exchanges and public engagement activities amplify the impact of ECA programs within their home communities?

1. Ten of the 11 evaluations collected data from program alumni
2. Nine of the 11 evaluations asked about alumni outcomes as part of the evaluation questions

KEY THEMES: WHAT DO ALUMNI WANT?

Several key themes emerged across the evaluations as to what alumni value from their initial exchanges and seek in alumni activities as well as the challenges that limit engagement.

What Alumni Want

- Alumni across the evaluated programs cited peer networks as one of the key benefits of programming. These networks often extend beyond professional contacts and more formally structured networks as many alumni create lasting friendships and support systems through their exchange experience.
- Alumni are eager for more opportunities to expand and sustain their networks. In addition to peer networks, alumni (especially younger alumni) value mentorship opportunities.
- Professional development opportunities are key motivations for alumni to remain engaged. Alumni value follow-on projects, small grants, and trainings as opportunities to further advance their careers.

Barriers to Engagement

- Program teams and embassies face a host of funding, logistical, and contextual challenges in trying to engage alumni. This includes matching post-program engagement efforts to a variety of different audiences, program sizes, geographies, and public diplomacy goals.
- Alumni events are often held in only a few cities, making it difficult for alumni located in other parts of the country to attend. Some alumni also face connectivity challenges that limit their ability to participate in virtual events.
- Alumni also face time constraints that reduce their ability to keep in contact with their peers or partake in other events.

STRATEGIES FOR CONSIDERATION: HOW CAN WE MEET ALUMNI NEEDS?

With these challenges and opportunities in mind, the evaluations provide insights for enhancing alumni engagement. The four cross-cutting approaches outlined below offer promising opportunities for engaging alumni. Each approach features several strategies for consideration as well as one detailed example of those strategies in action.

Cross-Cutting Approach 1: Leverage Alumni for Programming

Engaging alumni in programming – including exchange programs and alumni engagement efforts – enables ECA to sustain connections with alumni themselves, while facilitating networking opportunities and supporting alumni’s professional development goals.

Considerations

- Involving alumni in recruitment and selection processes; for example, providing an avenue for alumni to create their own recruitment materials/videos or serve as members of the interview and selection committees
- Involving alumni as pre-arrival mentors, as part of orientation, or as flight chaperones for younger alumni
- Convening alumni boards or working groups and/or collaborating with alumni associations to work with ECA's implementing partners to enhance the program
- Supporting alumni-directed thematic seminars, learning communities, or communities of practice where like-minded alumni can convene around a specific policy issue or experiences with successful small grant proposals
- Utilizing ACES to intentionally reach out to new or specific groups of alumni, particularly alumni who have not been engaged in the past and/or live outside the capital city
- Incentivizing alumni for their involvement, as well as setting clear expectations regarding responsibilities, materials/training, and support

Learning in Action

The **Academy for Women Entrepreneurs (AWE)** program requires that alumni be involved with future program cohorts, though the program maintains flexibility in allowing U.S. embassies and local implementing partners to identify the best mechanisms to do so. AWE alumnae often serve as mentors, speakers, or facilitators and participate in networking opportunities.



Cross-Cutting Approach 2: Communicate Early

ECA programs can increase the likelihood that participants will stay engaged post-program when opportunities to do so are presented early in their exchange experience. The evaluations reviewed for this task offer different recommendations on when to highlight opportunities and benefits of continued engagement, but they consistently indicate that earlier is better.

Considerations

- Communicating alumni benefits as part of program recruitment efforts
- Explaining expectations for ongoing alumni engagement during recruitment
- Including alumni engagement and giving back to communities as requirements in program descriptions
- Introducing funding opportunities in pre-arrival content
- Highlighting [Exchange Alumni](#) resources and events as part of closing events
- Communicating clearly the purpose and goals of alumni events, projects, or other opportunities

Learning in Action

As part of the pre-arrival content for the **Mandela Washington Fellowship (MWF)**, ECA's Office of Alumni Affairs presents on post-program opportunities, such as the Alumni Engagement Innovation Fund (AEIF) so that MWF participants are aware of available funding opportunities as they network and develop projects throughout their program.



Cross-Cutting Approach 3: Facilitate Mentorship Opportunities

Mentorship stands out across evaluations as an avenue for involving alumni in program activities. Seven of the 11 reviewed evaluations recommend introducing a mentorship component.

Considerations

- Pairing participants with alumni as pre-program mentors
- Initiating mentorship around a structured activity such as a follow-on projects
- Matching alumni mentors and mentees based on mentorship goals (e.g., business development, career advice, personal growth, topic of interest)
- Establishing a peer-to-peer mentorship model for grant applications
- Encouraging participants and alumni to take advantage of the mentorship matching features on the new Exchange Alumni website

Learning in Action

For the **TechGirls** program, structured collaborations, projects, and skill-building activities are key elements in successful mentor-mentee relationships. In partnership with the TechWomen program, many countries have established TechWomen-TechGirls clubs which provide spaces for career counseling, mentoring, leadership development, and more between TechWomen and TechGirls alumnae.



Cross-Cutting Approach 4: Vary Engagement to Meet Evolving Needs

The evaluations highlight the evolving needs of alumni throughout their professional and academic careers. Different phases of lifestyle and career warrant different approaches for engagement. Transition periods, particularly during career changes or upon return from ECA programming, are opportunities to support alumni and harness their enthusiasm for making connections.

Considerations

- Providing dedicated, tailored activities for earlier-career alumni who are still focused on education and separate activities for later-career alumni focused on leadership and job transitions
- Providing more assistance for alumni transitioning back into their careers post-program (e.g., resilience training or career guidance) for support with navigating their workplace after returning home
- Tailoring alumni engagement activities based on sector-specific needs; for example, for alumni of a writing program, that could include alumni book fairs, alumni reading tours, writing workshops and alternative writing courses, and publishing alumni anthologies
- Supporting "no-host" networking events or similar opportunities for alumni of varying backgrounds to meet informally

Learning in Action

The **Career Connections** alumni program targets specific programming to sub-audiences of alumni who need more attention and support, such as mid-career professionals, those transitioning between sectors, and underserved communities that are not as represented in an alumni cohort. The team uses a pre-program survey to gather information about alumni's professional backgrounds (such as employment sector, years of experience, etc.), so that presenters may tailor content to the backgrounds and needs of seminar attendees.

