

Evaluation Matters: Career Connections Program Case Study On Learning



THE EVALUATION

Why: The purpose of this evaluation was to inform the next iteration of the award with participant-driven recommendations on how to strengthen the Career Connections program.

What: The evaluation addressed the following questions:

1. Based on participant perspectives, is the Career Connections program following the right approach to providing professional development opportunities to U.S. alumni?

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THE PROGRAM

The Career Connections program brings together U.S. alumni (18-35 years old) of U.S. Government-sponsored exchange programs with expert career coaches, professionals from diverse fields, and international leaders to help alumni market their international exchange experiences. Delivered as two-day seminars across the country, the Career Connections program provides networking opportunities for U.S. alumni with leaders in their communities. During COVID-19, the seminars moved to the virtual environment and taken the form of one-time, in-depth workshops. Activities in both the in-person and virtual models include resume-building, developing a personal brand, translating skills gained through the exchange experience, developing an online presence, and networking to develop connections with fellow alumni and expert speakers alike.

KEY FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

Key findings and conclusions from the evaluation include:

- » **Intention, Goals, and Expectations.** Overall, participants felt the Career Connections program was implemented well and especially valued sessions with an immediate career impact. Most participants were highly satisfied with their Career Connections experience and would recommend the program to others. However, the program has been inconsistent in establishing clear goals, expectations, and audience.
- » **Outreach and Communications.** Both alumni and presenters appreciate communications using consistent platforms, with messaging that clearly relays the goals and intended audience of Career Connections seminars, at a regular cadence. Participants cited email being the most favored and reliable form of communication, supplemented by communication on Facebook and LinkedIn.
- » **Models: Virtual, In-Person, and Hybrid.** Although there are benefits and drawbacks to in-person and virtual models, they should be optimized for different purposes. Interviewees valued in-person programming for its interactivity and the depth of social connection. On the other hand, online programming offers reach, accessibility, and convenience benefits.
- » **Post-Event Connections.** Participants would like opportunities for continued engagement with each other and ECA after the Career Connections event. This could take the form of additional opportunities to provide feedback and recommendations, attending or participating in future Career Connections events, or engaging in multi-session seminars or reunions.
- » **Confidence in Career Next Steps.** Coming out of their Career Connections experience, alumni reported a greater sense of empowerment and confidence in their professional



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2. What are the immediate outcomes of Career Connections workshops?

Who: ECA's MELI Unit worked in partnership with the District Communications Group (DCG) to conduct the evaluation.

When: April through November 2021

How: The Evaluation Team conducted a literature review, a survey with ECA's alumni network, and in-depth interviews with program alumni, program presenters, and external experts.

How Much: \$98,453

skills. Alumni use this increased self-confidence and newly improved set of soft skills to inform and support next steps in their careers, like applying to a new position or graduate school.

- » **Forming & Sustaining Professional Connections.** Participants reported making valuable professional connections among fellow alumni and the presenters. Alumni-presenter connections most often take the form of a mentorship relationship, while alumni-to-alumni connections create professional networks. However, alumni struggled to maintain and capitalize on connections after Career Connections ended.

INTEGRATING RECOMMENDATIONS

In 2022, ECA and its implementing partner, Global Ties, have worked toward the following program adjustments to the Career Connections Program:

- » **Clarifying Intentions and Goals.** ECA has worked with Global Ties to improve clarity in the program design and better identify the audience in the design phase of each seminar. ECA has also conducted focus groups with alumni to learn about alumni needs, and has begun expanding Career Connections to audiences the program has historically not reached, including mid-career professionals and underserved communities that have not been as highly represented in alumni cohort.
- » **Programming.** ECA and Global Ties continue to support exchange alumni with interactive, practical professional development opportunities, both in-person and virtually. This includes networking sessions as well as grant writing workshops and office hours to support alumni with the Citizen Diplomacy Action Fund (CDAF). The team also continues to use pre-program participant surveys so that presenters may tailor content to the professional background and needs of seminar attendees.
- » **Strategic Communications.** ECA has worked with Global Ties' strategic communications manager to coordinate and refine the cadence, platforms, and content of Career Connections communications. ECA is also actively developing ways to highlight stories of alumni who have participated in Career Connections across social media and other platforms, including interviewing alumni at in-person events for episodes of ECA's podcast.
- » **Leveraging Virtual, In-Person, and Hybrid Program Models.** ECA and Global Ties continue to use a blend of in-person, virtual, and hybrid models, leveraging the strengths and purposes of each program type. The in-person model supports networking interactivity, while the virtual model focuses on information delivery and accessibility. The hybrid model brings the benefits of in-person and virtual to bear for longitudinal learning and continued engagement opportunities.
- » **Continued Engagement.** ECA and Global Ties are working to integrate a variety of platforms for continued engagement into the program, including: a long-term project to redesign the online alumni portal to support networks of smaller affinity groups; creating more asynchronous professional development content that people can access at any time; encouraging Career Connections alumni to form small groups and apply for the CDAF; and involving mid- and senior-level alumni as Career Connections presenters.