

EVALUATION MATTERS: ALUMNI THEMATIC INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGE SEMINARS (TIES) PROGRAM

ABOUT THE EVALUATION

Why: The purpose of this evaluation was to determine how well the Alumni TIES program meets its aims. It considered the structure of the program to assess the extent to which two components (seminars and grants) work together to support program outcomes.

Who: The MELI Unit contracted District Communications Group (DCG) to conduct the evaluation

How: DCG used a mixed methods approach for the evaluation, which included a literature review on alumni engagement best practices, seminar observations, an online survey of past participants, and qualitative interviews with program stakeholders including Alumni Affairs staff, embassy and regional bureau representatives, current participants, and alumni. The evaluation team applied a contribution analysis framework to data analysis and interpretation.

When: Sept 2022 - Nov 2023

How Much: \$415,764

The Program

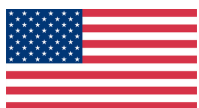
Since 2015, ECA's Office of Alumni Affairs has hosted Alumni TIES events for USG-sponsored exchange alumni as an opportunity to explore key regional issues, receive training, collaborate with fellow alumni, and apply for small grants to implement projects in their home communities. These three-to-four-day seminars have provided participants with formal and informal opportunities for networking and, following the seminars, an opportunity to apply for funding to complete a project related to the seminar's theme in their home community.

Key Findings and Conclusions

Department of State (DoS) stakeholders view alumni engagement as a strategic tool. Alumni are uniquely able to provide local insights and advice to all embassy sections, support programming, and credibly amplify embassy messaging to more diverse in-country audiences. ECA's alumni programming helps engage alumni in meaningful ways that many embassies do not have the resources to do.

Alumni TIES events contribute to short-term personal outcomes but can be further refined.

While Alumni TIES seminars were well-liked and ran smoothly, themes were overly broad and did not have practical use for many participants. Participants stressed that they would prefer more targeted expert-led sessions, skills-building workshops, theme- and context-appropriate local field visits, as well as concrete guidance after the seminar from DoS about the grants and calls to action in support of the seminar's topic.



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<https://eca.state.gov/impact/evaluation-eca/evaluation-initiative/completed-evaluations>

EVALUATION QUESTIONS:

1. How do different Alumni TIES elements contribute to program outcomes?
2. To what extent does Alumni TIES contribute to sustained engagement among exchange alumni?
3. How do Department of State (DoS) stakeholders leverage Alumni TIES to support U.S. foreign policy and public diplomacy goals?

Connections made during the program are not sustained long-term. Participants appreciated being able to meet like-minded alumni in person but said there was not an easy way during the program to identify the participants most relevant to their professional specialties.

Grants are the single most effective Alumni TIES program element (compared with networking and seminar attendance) for supporting and engaging alumni. Program outcomes related to applied learning and sustained networking were higher among those alumni who received grants. In particular, small grant opportunities excited students and younger alumni, though those same individuals struggled most to understand the complex regulations with grant parameters and evaluation criteria.

There is an opportunity to increase engagement with regional bureaus and embassies to drive Alumni TIES programming. Stakeholders from regional bureaus and embassies expressed desire for more meaningful collaboration during program planning; specifically: providing greater input into the agenda, refining themes to better connect them to policy priorities, making the seminars more regionally focused including identifying potential local speakers and field visit sites.

Integrated Recommendations

ECA's Office of Alumni Affairs is piloting a new approach to TIES events. The Office of Alumni Affairs reached out to all six regional bureaus with an offer to provide funding for an alumni engagement event. Each region had the opportunity to determine the topic, structure, location and audience that best meets their needs, so long as the events meet the broad goals and objectives of:

- Advancing U.S. foreign policy priorities by continuing and deepening engagement with exchange alumni;
- Engaging alumni to contribute to shared goals with U.S. Missions;
- Strengthening networks among alumni across programs and countries and with U.S. government.

Posts have selected formats that include:

- Larger, regional seminars for alumni from multiple countries;
- Multiple, smaller events within a region, each designed for alumni from a single country;
- Topical seminars open to alumni throughout the region.

Proposals submitted by posts included some elements of the original Alumni TIES program, such as the involvement of U.S. and local experts, participant-led panels, and/or follow-on mini-grants. ECA's Office of Alumni Affairs will monitor the distinct seminar formats as well as the overall approach providing funding to each region. This pilot will inform future alumni engagement initiatives and the structure of Alumni TIES and similar events moving forward.