

BUREAU OF EDUCATIONAL AND CULTURAL AFFAIRS

# **MONITORING, EVALUATION, LEARNING, AND INNOVATION UNIT**



# **EVALUATION REPORT**

## **Youth All-Stars Abroad Pilot**

APRIL 2023 (UPDATED)

EVALUATION



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# EVALUATION OVERVIEW

## EVALUATION PURPOSE

As part of its innovation line of effort, the Monitoring, Evaluation, Learning, and Innovation (MELI) Unit is supporting Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA)'s Sports Diplomacy Division in conducting a pilot of the Youth All-Stars Abroad (YAA) program. Innovation activities at ECA include program pilots that look to increase not only the number, but the types, of participants engaged in ECA programs. The MELI Unit is conducting an evaluation of the YAA program to provide insight on the efficacy of this initial pilot, focusing on highlighting the program's successes and emergent outcomes, and where modifications need to be made for future implementation.

## PROGRAM BACKGROUND

Under ECA's Sports Visitor Program, implemented by FHI 360, the YAA pilot is a sports-based international exchange for American youth athletes and their coaches to engage in sports camps and clinics alongside international Sports Diplomacy alumni from around the world. The YAA pilot is designed to build leadership, academic, career, and cross-cultural skills among underserved American and international high school-aged youth athletes. The program also aims to encourage participants to explore off-the-field sports-based careers or careers in international affairs or diplomacy.

The YAA pilot was a 19-day in-person program with virtual pre- and post-program content to further program objectives. The program took place in São Paulo, Brazil from July 1-July 12, 2022, immediately following a U.S.-based exchange for Brazilian participants from June 24-July 1, 2022 as part of a multi-country soccer and leadership program in conjunction with the Julie Foudy & espnW Sports Leadership Academy (JFSLA). Nine American and six Brazilian high school-aged girls participated.

## EVALUATION DESIGN

This evaluation used a qualitative approach consisting of interviews with stakeholders involved in the pilot's planning and administration to analyze the success of this initial pilot, as well as any emergent outcomes experienced by participants. The evaluation was conducted by two members of ECA's MELI Unit (the MELI team).

The MELI team conducted individual or small-group interviews with 21 individuals across the following stakeholder groups:

- ECA/FHI 360 Staff (4)
- U.S. Consulate São Paulo Staff (Consulate) (2)
- The Julie Foudy & espnW Sports Leadership Academy Coaches (2)
- AmericaSCORES and South Bronx United (local U.S. partners) (4)
- Pelado Real (local Brazilian partner) (2)
- U.S. Participants (5) and
- Parents/Legal Guardians of the U.S. Participants (2)

All interviews were conducted virtually via either Microsoft Teams or GoogleMeets, and lasted 30 to 60 minutes.

## ANALYSIS

Upon completion of data collection, the MELI team members individually carried out preliminary analysis of the qualitative data. During this open coding stage, the MELI team identified top-level themes from interview transcripts. Following the preliminary analysis phase, the MELI team convened virtually to conduct a rigorous data analysis and integration process. Together, the team discussed the preliminary findings from each of the data sources, identified key themes and areas for further analysis, and synthesized the information in order to develop findings, conclusions, and recommendations that capture the rich information found across all data sources.



## **LIMITATIONS**

The MELI team attempted to secure interviews with the Brazilian participants, but unable to complete these interviews due to issues securing interpretation and translation services. Ultimately, the MELI team moved forward with U.S. participant interviews only, meaning that findings from the participant perspective are limited to that group only.



## STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

### COLLABORATION

**The YAA pilot required a great deal of collaboration among a variety of stakeholders to be implemented successfully, and an important aspect of this success was how organizers leveraged pre-existing organizational connections.** For instance, the local U.S. partner organizations noted that they have experience working with each other as well as previous partnerships with JFSLA and FHI 360, which they mentioned was a significant help to their engagement with FHI 360 and ECA. The local U.S. partners even expressed that they would have been interested in being further embedded in the program planning process, which they felt would have helped to create more robust programming for their students.

*“Partnered with JFSLA for many years, [and have a] great relationship and partnership with them.” - Local U.S. Partner*

*“I would be really curious...to learn more about the back-end work on how a program like this runs and as often as possible the people who do the direct service, day-to-day work, or having a different or valuable lens. I would love to be involved in that.” - Local U.S. Partner*

The coaches with Pelado Real mentioned that the extensive network of alumni, JFSLA coaches, and ECA was critical to the success of the program. The coaches themselves are alumni of ECA’s Global Sports Mentoring Program and used their past experiences and partnerships to work in conjunction with the Consulate and JFSLA to bring this program to life. They continued that collaboration to help design and implement the program.

*“When I came back from [Global Sports Mentoring Program] I had an action plan. Part of it was bigger connections between Brazil and the U.S. - showing [the] Brazilian [participants] opportunities they could have for going to U.S. for international experience or short-term, or becoming college athlete...continued convo with [JFSLA] because I was fortunate to make this connection in U.S.; when we saw we could make this work I reached out to State and that’s how they created the program.” - Pelado Real*

The Consulate was also an important stakeholder in the planning process, and ECA observed that their involvement had been incredibly helpful in that the Consulate was able to suggest program components that the team had not previously considered: *"I think it was helpful to have Post in support of the program. They at different points had solid suggestions... They were advocating for having a component that we hadn't considered...which was including local underserved youth."*

## CHALLENGES

**Despite the necessity of involving a wide variety of stakeholders, and the organizers' ability to leverage pre-existing partnerships, collaboration at this scale was not without challenges.**

The primary challenge expressed by the U.S. Consulate was that they had been brought into the planning process too late, leaving them unable to have meaningful input. For example, the Consulate's primary audience is Brazilian youth, and targeting programming to this population is central to their strategic goals. ECA's goal, however, was to expand programming to an American youth audience, something that is not a part of the Consulate's strategic goals. The Consulate indicated that earlier involvement would have allowed them to work with ECA to better align these priorities.

*"I think if this project were to repeat, we'd like to have a bit more input in the program objectives to begin with and earlier on to ensure it's having maximum impact specifically for the Brazilian participants...to see our mission objective with respect to youth audiences are being respected." - U.S. Consulate*

The Consulate also did not have a chance for input on the program's dates and expressed that they would have liked for the participants to get more time in-country, even if only for a couple days. This would have a couple of benefits:

1. To get Brazilian participants from underserved or underprivileged families (the program's target audience) to experience more of their country, which they might not otherwise be able to do; and
2. To expand the cultural exchange opportunities for the American participants by exposing them to a greater number of cultural experiences and opportunities to engage with Brazilian citizens.



*"If we do it again it would be great to have...a bit of authorship of dates to maximize opportunities for [the] group for scheduling and travel. [It] could have been more impactful to get the [participants] to other parts of Brazil and have greater understanding of [the country]."*  
- U.S. Consulate

Furthermore, the Consulate wondered if having two in-country partners would create a more robust exchange experience while in-country. While the soccer program run by Pelado Real created a great environment for on-the-field skills and leadership development, the Consulate felt the program lacked the cultural components of a traditional exchange program. Ideally, having two in-country partners where one with experience implementing exchange programs handles the cultural components while another that runs the sports programming components would create a more powerful experience for all participants.

*"Need two local partners – sport partner and separate logistical partner for the exchange."* - U.S. Consulate

On the U.S. side, FHI 360 and the local U.S. partners noted that their main challenge was getting buy-in from the parents/guardians of the U.S. participants. Some of the parents were not comfortable sending their children on the program, even though the respective participants were very interested, and the program was highly recommended by the local U.S. partner organizations. Another reason for the difficulty in gaining buy-in was the virtual nature of all pre-program interaction between FHI 360 and parents/guardians. FHI 360 felt that holding in-person information sessions would have been more powerful and more effective as the parents/guardians could have met and talked with staff face-to-face in a more organic process.

*"Getting the parents' buy-in [was a challenge that we faced]. That aspect should be done in person rather than virtual (as we did this time). [We need] to have a more organic approach."*  
- FHI 360

*"There were a few kids that were highly interested [and] highly recommended, but their parents weren't comfortable sending their kids [which is an] unfortunate reality."* - FHI 360

The pilot recruited participants from Spanish-speaking communities and families, which required materials to be available in both English and Spanish. This presented a few additional challenges. The local U.S. partners mentioned that compilation and dissemination of all materials in English and Spanish was the most challenging part of the





of the pre-program period due to the level of effort required and the partners' limited bandwidth. Additionally, the dual issue of translation/interpretation and virtual engagement meant that parents/guardians generally went to the local U.S. partners with their questions and concerns, and the local U.S. partners then passed those questions/concerns to FHI 360. This round-about process meant information was sometimes miscommunicated, which presented a burden to the local U.S. partners with their small staff sizes. That said, FHI 360 received high praise for their assistance to the local U.S. partners.

*"Most of the parents of participants are Spanish-speaking and made clear to [FHI 360] that translation and interpretation was needed in both English and Spanish so that all instruction would be in individually preferred languages. [The] compilation and dissemination of this piece was most challenging" - Local U.S. Partner*

*"Ryan was amazing. I know it's a lot to organize something like this...[b]ut Ryan [at FHI 360] and everyone was super helpful, very smooth." - Local U.S. Partner*

There were additional issues with miscommunication which resulted in participants not being fully informed about key details of the program. In particular, the U.S. participants mentioned confusion in terms of how the program was structured and how to prepare. One participant noted that she didn't realize they would be going to New Jersey before traveling to Brazil, and others stated that they had not been prepared for the cold weather in Brazil.

*"At first, I just thought we were going to go straight to Brazil, I didn't realize we would go to JFSLA [in New Jersey]." - U.S. Participant*

*"[My least favorite part was] the cold. I was in summer clothes and brought summer clothes [to Brazil] because I was expecting summer, but it wasn't." - U.S. Participant*

And finally, some stakeholders acknowledged that the pilot had faced challenges in determining how best to involve the JFLSA coaches who traveled with the American cohort to Brazil. While these coaches were heavily involved in the JFSLA Camp, including helping to deliver programming, they were sidelined to observer roles during the Brazil Camp. It was widely thought that the JFSLA coaches were an under-utilized resource that stakeholders would have liked to see be more directly involved in both camp settings.



*“The U.S. coaches who participated in Brazil, my sense was that was an underutilized resource. We had U.S. coaches with a ton of expertise so we could have done a parallel program in-country and created an opportunity for them to engage with other Brazilian coaches. They had great engagement with [the participants] and Pelado Real, but we could have treated them somewhat like Sports Envoys and done other external program and pull a broader audience into this program and widen the impact.” – U.S. Consulate*

## PROGRAM STRUCTURE AND SCHEDULE

Youth All-Stars Abroad was segmented into two distinct program components: the JFSLA Camp in New Jersey and the in-country camp in Brazil. Having the JFSLA Camp prior to the Brazil Camp provided several benefits, including:

- The participants were able to feel more comfortable as a group before they traveled internationally;
- The U.S. participants were able to gain greater exposure to other cultures as participants at the JFSLA Camp represented a diverse range of international participants'; and
- Program organizers had additional time to gain parental buy-in for the participants traveling internationally, something that would be a first-time experience for many of them.

However, despite these benefits, it was observed by some stakeholders that the JFSLA Camp took away time participants could have spent in Brazil, which is something stakeholders agreed could have benefited both the American and Brazilian participants involved in the program. As one staff person from the U.S. Consulate stated: *“Could have been more impactful to get the [participants] to other parts of Brazil and have greater understanding of Brazil.”*

Another area to consider is the daily schedule of the camps. The JFSLA Camp was described as more structured than the Brazil Camp, which some interviewees argued led to a better learning environment at JFSLA but a better relationship-building environment in Brazil. The more structured schedule at the JFSLA Camp helped ensure that a high-volume of programming could be accomplished in a short period of time, while the more relaxed schedule in Brazil gave the participants more time for informal interaction.



At times, however, the participants struggled with the schedule at the JFSLA Camp. While the schedule for field and classroom lessons was tightly packed, some interviewees reported that there was a lack of time set aside for warm-ups and no bedtimes. Additionally, at the JFSLA Camp the meal-time environment was perceived as rushed, as opposed to the much more laid-back meal-time environment at the Brazil Camp.

*“A lot of the [Brazil Camp] was centered around food and community with food. [Mealtime for us] was very short...sit down with food then hop to next activity to keep everyone on time. The food piece [in Brazil] was intentionally slow to help form relationships...the amount of time spent at the table in their culture is so much longer so the intention to be present at a meal is much different than U.S. which was ‘eat and move on’.” – JFSLA*

## COVID-19 CHALLENGES

**While COVID was an expected challenge, there was confusion among stakeholders regarding the mitigation measures, which this caused frustration.** The JFSLA Camp had a few participants, coaches, and staff test positive for COVID during the program. The JFSLA Camp had set expectations and created mitigation protocols for anyone who contracted COVID, but it seemed to the participants and coaches that those protocols were changed more than a few times. First, the host school of the JFSLA Camp did not communicate well regarding those who had to quarantine and where they were allowed to go on the campus. The Brazilian coach and participants who contracted COVID were also confused that the school imposed stricter isolation requirements than what the CDC was recommending at the time, which they said was difficult to explain to the Brazilian participants who were forced to quarantine.

## SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

**The Youth All-Stars Abroad pilot was successful in developing participants’ self-confidence and leadership skills.** The camp exposed participants to women in leadership positions, including female coaches and program staff. The coaches stated that this exposure helped increase the participants’ self-confidence. Many participants told the JFSLA coaches and staff and the local U.S. partners that they had never had an all-female coaching staff; all of the coaches they have had were all or majority male. Having all-female coaches gave the participants increased confidence in their sporting abilities and being women in sports, and were inspired to become female coaches for other young women as



a result. They want to be the role models that the female YAA staff were for them.

*“One of the participants made the statement early on that she has not had a female coach and she would like to volunteer... The [participants] also saw examples of females using sports to create a career...[the participants] were surrounded by this for [three weeks] and got to experience the fruits of these careers.” – JFSLA*

*“One youth said she has never been coached by females before but now wants to be a local coach to other [young women].” - JFSLA*

The U.S. participants themselves reported gaining leadership skills from the YAA program, and that they have been able to apply those skills since returning home. For example, participants described using their leadership skills to foster more inclusive and team-oriented play within their local U.S. partner clubs. The local U.S. partners confirmed that they can see their students’ (the participants) increased confidence and leadership skills post-program, and that the participants are already applying what they have learned.

*“I feel like [my fellow participants] taught me how to love the sport again and gave [me] back my confidence regardless of how I play.” – U.S. Participant*

*“[When] I go to practice, I try to talk to [everyone], [anyone] that I see singled out...to bring them all together because that's what Brazil [and] the [other participants] taught me as well, that everyone is always a team no matter what. So, coming back [home], I was able to apply those skills.” – U.S. Participant*

*“Two [students] are captains of their teams and [are doing very well since] they came back, so they are putting to use what they learned.” – Local U.S. Partner*

Participants demonstrating newfound leadership was conducted in unexpected ways during the program as well. For instance, two Spanish-speaking translators who were part of the JFSLA camp contracted COVID and had to quarantine, which presented a challenge for interpretation. However, many of the American participants immediately stepped up to act as translators without being asked, since they come from Spanish-speaking backgrounds. This allowed the participants to demonstrate leadership through their language skills.



*"[It was] really cool to see that they just stepped up immediately without being requested; two translators out with COVID and kids stepped up." - JFSLA*

*"[The American participants] who spoke Spanish jumped up and were so excited to act as translators, their faces lit up that all of the sudden these American kids could use something they learned" - JFSLA*

The U.S. participants also demonstrated improved cross-cultural competence. They were very grateful for the opportunity to participate in a program with young women from other countries, expressing how incredible of an experience it was to be immersed in a new culture and to be able to see the differences between the U.S. and Brazil. As a direct results of this cultural immersion, some U.S. participants are working to set up ways to donate some of their old soccer gear for the Brazilian participants after seeing the differences between U.S. and Brazilian women soccer. They noted being surprised that many of the Brazilian players did not have a lot of equipment, and how hard it was for women teams to get funding in Brazil.

*"[My favorite part] was the diversity. When I went to [the JFSLA camp], there were [participants] from Brazil, South Africa, India, Jordan, and I didn't even know Jordan was a country" - U.S. Participant*

*"Before going to New Jersey and Brazil, I didn't know how other people were, so getting to see how other people live, how they get through the day different from how I do, it's so amazing. Now I know it's not just the way I live in the world, it's how other people live that impact everything." - U.S. Participant*

*"I realized that [the Brazilian participants] lacked a lot of equipment...I'm hoping to execute my plan of giving back to [the Brazilian participants] by donating cleats or shirts, but mainly cleats." - U.S. Participant*

*"I didn't know that [Brazilian women] struggled to play football because usually everyone's perspective is that Brazil [is] the heart of soccer, but it wasn't true. [Brazilian women] have trouble getting funding [for] tournaments and making women's teams. It's not as common, as people think it is here in the U.S." - U.S. Participant*

A few participants mentioned that they were using this experience to help write college admissions essays. JFSLA and FHI 360 staff confirmed that they had talked to the



participants at multiple points about using this experience on their college application essays because of the soft skills the participants were able to develop. The Pelado Real coaches also expressed that the program was an excellent opportunity for the Brazilian participants to see the opportunities they would have to play soccer in the United States and to develop further the soft skills that they focused so heavily on during programming.

*"I've definitely been able to write personal essays about the programs to fit into college applications..." - U.S. Participant*

*"Way to ensure lasting impact. Something they could put on a college CV." - FHI 360*

Finally, the participants wanted other young women to have the same opportunity that they wouldn't normally have to go abroad. They wanted others to be able to learn about new cultures and have personal growth, as they did. Some participants even noted that they now see how much they take for granted in their daily lives after interacting with the Brazilian participants.

*"People don't learn until you actually experience it yourself, or you see it yourself, which is usually what causes personal growth for a person and a great developing a better mindset" - U.S. Participant*

*"I feel like it was something not only memorable, it was something that showed you not only a lot about yourself, but it can probably bring you so many life lessons" - U.S. Participant*

## PARTICIPANT DIVERSITY

**The program met its diversity goal by including a traditionally underrepresented group; however, this diversity goal could alternatively be achieved by reaching broader audiences.** As stated above, the YAA pilot was designed to build leadership, academic, career, and cross-cultural skills among underserved American and international high school-aged youth athletes. Per the recruitment plan for YAA, ECA and FHI 360 intended to promote recruitment from African American, Afro-Latino, Latino, Native American, and Asian American serving organizations. Additionally, the program prioritized youth who have not had the opportunities to travel abroad.



In implementing this recruitment plan, ECA and FHI 360 were able to work with local U.S. partners in underserved communities to recruit American students who are from communities that face high barriers to participation in exchange programming. It is unclear, however, the extent to which such recruitment was successful for the Brazilian group. Post reported that while many of the participants in Brazil received some form of financial assistance, the participants able to travel to the United States were likely of greater financial means.

*"[We] need to find opportunity to cover costs of underserved participants to join the program. [We] need a transparent application process for youth to spread the opportunity. One idea - potential for post to recruit large cohort for participation in in-country activities, and then select smaller cohort for US travel." – U.S. Consulate*

However, stakeholders were split in their view of the program's recruitment. Despite the success in recruiting an American cohort from a community traditionally underrepresented in exchange programming, some argued that there needed to be more diversity within the group. Because the American cohort only represented their small community in the Bronx, New York and not the full diversity of the United States, the perception is that the international participants walked away with a limited view of the United States. Additionally, a more diverse group would allow for cultural exchange to happen within the American group as well.

*"I would like to see more diversity within the American cohort - now these kids in Brazil have "one story" about Americans based on the [American group]." - JFSLA*

*"My personal opinion is that the program can represent the racial diversity we have in America (Mexican American, White, African American, Asian American) and the socioeconomic diversity of America. This can allow cultural respect to occur within the American participant group, not just between countries." - JFSLA*

Other stakeholders pointed out that the homogeneity of the group, and its similarity to the international groups, was beneficial for this pilot. Specifically, as the participants all spoke Spanish, it made communication among the participants much easier.

*"I think that because of where we were, I think it was an asset that they were Spanish-speaking, since we were in a Portuguese-speaking country since they were able to understand everyone more easily." – FHI 360*





The program met its goal of reaching an audience underrepresented in exchange programming, but there is disagreement among stakeholders on how that goal should be reached in the future, with opinions ranging from cohorts being larger with more ethnically-/geographically-diverse recruitment, to cohorts remaining small and homogeneous with more programs throughout the year. Ultimately, expanding the program and reaching a broader audience would allow for either of these options, and allow the program to continue its role in providing cultural exchange opportunities to underserved communities.

*"Yes. Of course. Absolutely continue, and in my view expand. A pilot was good, but if more kids can access the program, that will do a lot for program diversity. The majority of kids in the U.S. don't have the privilege to travel, so our pool of participants is large." - FHI 360*

*"Definitely something we could continue. Can change lives and did changes their lives. So many don't get the opportunity to travel, or even go to the next state. Providing this opportunity provides an expanded worldview. They're able look at their lives and have a different outlook. It will make a difference." - FHI 360*





# CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Youth All-Stars Abroad pilot program demonstrated the importance of including American youth audiences in Sports Diplomacy programming and a proof of concept for how to do so. Should the program continue, ECA should consider the following recommendations:

A few adjustments to the program would improve participants' overall experience. These adjustments include:

- Considering expanding the program length beyond the current three weeks, which would allow for additional time in-country;
- Ensuring that time is built into the schedule to allow participants time to engage with one another away from scheduled activities. This could include additional time during meals or longer periods between activities;
- Providing participants ample time to rest and recharge each day by ensuring bedtimes are, at the very least, encouraged, and that time to warm-up before practice is provided.

Establishing parent/guardian buy-in is vital to the program's success. ECA should consider the following to assist in the process of working with local U.S. partners to gain that buy-in:

- Develop a pre-departure orientation aimed specifically at parents/guardians and managed centrally by the implementing partner, ensuring that consistent information is provided to all parties.
- Ensure that all information (marketing, application material, program structure) are available in multiple languages in advance based on the target audiences' interpretation needs.
- Use the alumni (and even their parents) as mentors for the next cohort, which could include participating in Q&As with potential participants and their parents/guardians. This would help in establishing parental buy-in as hearing from former participants could help alleviate concerns better than hearing from program organizers.

Involving the Consulate was an important component of the pilot. However, *if the model of two-way engagement is going to be continued*, then U.S. Embassies and Consulates need to be involved sooner in the planning process for a successful collaboration. ECA should establish a call for proposals to solicit interest from U.S. Embassies and Consulates.

Local partners in-country and the United States were instrumental in the creation and implementation of Youth All-Stars Abroad. ECA should consider continuing to engage these partners in the following ways:

- Engage multiple in-country partners to create a more robust program experience - one partner for sports programming and a second partner to manage cultural and off-the-field learning.
- Increase the involvement of local American partners in the program development process.

The American coaches were an under-utilized resource and ECA should explore options to increase their engagement, especially during the in-country component. One option could be to host parallel programming for the coaches (similar to Sports Envoys), which would have the added benefit of pulling a broader audience into the program and widen the impact.

Expanding the number of participants who can participate in the program would allow better achievement of its diversity goal by reaching a broader audience. This could mean larger cohorts recruited from multiple geographic areas, it could mean multiple small cohorts each year where each group is recruited from the same community, or some combination of the two. ECA should explore all possible options.



## **ABOUT THE MONITORING, EVALUATION, LEARNING, AND INNOVATION UNIT**

The Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs' (ECA) Monitoring Evaluation Learning and Innovation (MELI) Unit has been at the forefront of the Department of State's monitoring and evaluation (M&E) efforts since its creation in 1999. Throughout its 20+ years, the MELI Unit has built a robust M&E system to ensure that ECA program staff, senior leadership, and implementing partners benefit from timely performance data that they can utilize for evidence-based decision-making.

For a complete listing of ongoing evaluation projects, an archive of completed reports, and resources for conducting evaluations, visit the MELI Unit's website: <https://eca.state.gov/impact/eca-evaluation-division>

If you would like additional information or have any questions, please contact us at [ECAevaluation@state.gov](mailto:ECAevaluation@state.gov)



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