

EVALUATION MATTERS: YSEALI ACADEMIC FELLOWSHIP PROGRAM

The Program

The Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative (YSEALI) Academic Fellowship is designed to strengthen leadership development across the 10 member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Timor-Leste, deepen engagement with young leaders aged 18-25 on key regional and global challenges, and strengthen people-to-people ties between the United States and Southeast Asia. The Academic Fellowship, managed by the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA), includes a five-week educational exchange at a U.S. university, focused on themes of civic engagement, environmental issues, and social entrepreneurship & economic development. Following completion of the educational exchange, alumni may participate in community projects and alumni networks that foster long-term connections with peers, posts, U.S. university implementing partners and others.

ASEAN Members States: Brunei, Burma (Myanmar), Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam.

ABOUT THE EVALUATION

WHY: The purpose of this evaluation was to determine how successful YSEALI has been in meeting program goals and to inform programmatic decision-making.

WHO: The MELI Unit contracted The District Communications Group and its subcontractor NORC at the University of Chicago to conduct the evaluation.

WHEN: November 2021 – December 2022

HOW: The evaluation employed a mixed-methods, complexity-aware design, conducted in several iterative phases.

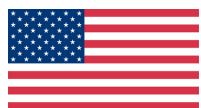
HOW MUCH: \$819,179 (*including capacity-building of MELI Unit staff on complexity-aware evaluation designs*)

Key Findings and Conclusions

Advancement of Fellows' Professional & Academic

Goals: Most alumni reported that the program contributed positively to their professional and academic goals by improving their knowledge and skills and expanding their ability to collaborate with others in their field. Alumni suggested that their improvements in soft skills, such as leadership, collaboration, and confidence, were an important, long-lasting outcome of the exchange program. Some expressed a desire for more in-depth lessons related to their subject area (environment, civic engagement, etc.) and a greater tailoring to the Southeast Asian context.

Networks & Post-Program Activities for Alumni: Most alumni reported that relationships formed through YSEALI have contributed positively to their academic, professional, and personal outcomes and that these networks also provide more concrete benefits, such as mentorship opportunities. The majority of alumni survey respondents indicated that they implemented or were continuing to implement community projects, but some noted that a lack of adequate funding was a barrier to realizing their projects.



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CONTACT US: ECAEVALUATION@STATE.GOV

You can find the full evaluation report here:
<https://eca.state.gov/impact/evaluation-eca/evaluation-initiative/completed-evaluations>

EVALUATION QUESTIONS:

1. How has the YSEALI program and experience in the U.S. contributed to the advancement of Fellows' professional and academic goals? What specific aspects of the YSEALI experience do Fellows perceive as the most important contributors to their professional and academic pathways?
2. How have networks and other post-program activities contributed to alumni outcomes?
3. How does the Fellows' home country context help or hinder Fellows as they apply lessons learned from the YSEALI program?
4. How has participation in YSEALI influenced Fellows' perceptions of the U.S.?
5. How do alumni see themselves in relation to the regional ASEAN community?
6. Do Fellows see value to their own careers in bringing American Fellows to their countries? What do Fellows see as recommend as impactful ways to set up such a program?

Network Form & Efficacy: Alumni connections take place within, across, and outside of 19 formal and informal networks. Home country alumni associations appear to be particularly effective in connecting YSEALI alumni and furthering alumni professional and academic goals. In addition, many participants forge strong ties with a small group of cohort-mates, and these become informal networks that are sustained by alumni-organized efforts. There is decreased engagement with large cohort-wide alumni events and online groups over time.

Home Country Context in Post-Program Phase: Many alumni agreed that they were able to apply lessons learned from YSEALI in their home countries, but some shared that their home contexts presented challenges in this regard, due to an unsupportive political climate and lack of funding for post-program projects.

Influence on Participant Views: The majority of alumni said the YSEALI program led to increases in favorable views of American people. By extension, the vast majority of alumni saw value in a reciprocal exchange that would bring U.S. fellows to their countries. Alumni also stated their participation in the YSEALI program resulted in their feeling closer connection to the wider ASEAN community.

Integrating Recommendations

Strengthen communication and collaboration between various stakeholders, including participating posts, implementing partners (IPs), the U.S. Mission to ASEAN, and the ECA program team. In its upcoming Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) (to be issued in early 2024), the YSEALI program team will be moving from a multiple-IP model to a single IP model. The model will include a new requirement for a dedicated program-wide website to serve as a central clearinghouse for resources and communication. To help flesh out these new protocols around communication, the YSEALI team held a summit with all stakeholders in December 2023, where best practices and new program models were disseminated and discussed.

Encourage IPs to incorporate more contextualized curricula into their lessons. Drawing from detailed Southeast Asian case studies will make the material more relevant and engaging for participants. The new NOFO includes steps and requirements to move away from "Americans presenting about Southeast Asia." Instead, it will feature more speakers who are native to the region as well as recognized experts with thorough regional expertise. In cases where experts may not be available, participants themselves will be engaged by the IPs as speakers wherever possible.

Consider increasing the number and total value of grants for alumni to carry out community projects upon return to their home communities. The new NOFO includes a stronger mandate around mini-grants, with funds newly available to YSEALI participants administered by both the IP and post. At the same time, IPs will be encouraged to "think creatively" about employing mini-grants for purposes not limited to a single project, which may include collaborative initiatives involving groups of participants or other projects/actions.