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EVALUATION REPORT

Career Connections Program

November 2021



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EVALUATION REPORT: BUREAU OF EDUCATIONAL AND CULTURAL AFFAIRS MELI UNIT

CAREER CONNECTIONS EVALUATION

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ACRONYMS

DCG	District Communications Group
DoS	U.S. Department of State
ECA	Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs
FY	Fiscal Year
NGO	Non-governmental organization
USG	U.S. Government

TERMINOLOGY

To distinguish between the various respond groups within this evaluation, the following distinct terminology will be used:

Alumni: ECA exchange program alumni who attended one or more Career Connections seminars. Refers to individuals who participated in an interview and/or completed a survey as part of this evaluation. Does not refer to the general group of ECA alumni.

Presenters: Individuals who presented in one or more Career Connections seminars. Refers to individuals who participated in an interview as part of this evaluation.

Participants: Alumni and presenters who attended one or more Career Connections seminars. Refers to individuals who participated in an interview and/or completed a survey as part of this evaluation.

Interviewees: Alumni, presenters, and sometimes experts who participated in an interview as part of this evaluation. Used to distinguish qualitative from quantitative findings.

Respondents: Alumni who completed the evaluation survey. Used to distinguish quantitative from qualitative findings.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The U.S. Department of State Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA), through its 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 have 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.

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. The evaluation included participants (exchange program alumni and seminar presenters) involved in the Career Connections program from its inception in 2019 through calendar year 2020. This period included 635 program participants and 100 former presenters.

To this end, several quantitative and qualitative data collection methods were utilized, including:

- Literature Review of existing research on best practices in professional development training.
- In-depth interviews with three key audiences:
 1. Alumni: Thirty-nine former participants were interviewed, representing both of the Career Connections seminar delivery models (virtual and in-person).
 2. Presenters: Fifteen presenters were interviewed, representing both of the Career Connections seminar delivery models (virtual and in-person).
 3. Experts: In-depth interviews with nine authors and/or with private sector/interagency leaders that organize similar programs and networking events to identify best practices in several sectors and industries.
- Alumni survey conducted with two groups: (1) alumni that had participated in one or more Career Connections' seminars; and (2) alumni that had not participated in any Career Connections seminar. The survey closed with a 17 percent response rate for Career Connections participants and 27 respondents which had not participated in Career Connections.

The main findings and conclusions from this evaluation were as follows:

- Overall, participants felt the Career Connections program was well implemented. Most participants were highly satisfied with their Career Connections experience, found it more useful than other professional development opportunities, and would recommend the program to others. Alumni reported that they were satisfied by the diverse mix of presenter backgrounds and industry experience, as well as the various content topics, especially sessions that had an immediate career impact (resume writing workshop, networking, etc.).
- Many participants felt that Career Connections is inconsistent in establishing clear goals, expectations, and an intentional audience for the programming. Participants perceived that Career Connections was narrowly focused on the needs of those early in their career and those targeted towards a government-track audience at the cost of other audiences. Participants desired more targeted attention to other audiences like mid-career professionals and those transitioning between sectors.
- In terms of ongoing outreach and communications from ECA, alumni expressed that they value consistency in communication mode and platform – with email being the most favored and reliable form of communication. Supplemental communication on Facebook and LinkedIn is also helpful. Alumni also preferred a regular cadence of outreach.
- Alumni and presenters valued interactive sessions the most, such as those that allow for skills-based trainings and networking, over PowerPoint presentations. Although there are benefits and drawbacks to in-person and virtual models, they should be optimized for different purposes. Participants valued in-person programming for depth: interactivity and connection. However, virtual programming offers reach: accessibility and convenience benefits.
- Participants shared a desire for a continued engagement with each other and ECA after the Career Connections event. This could take multiple forms: additional opportunities to provide feedback, attend or participate in future events, and engage in multi-session seminars or reunions with the same individuals to strengthen the connections formed.
- Coming out of their Career Connections experience, alumni reported a greater sense of empowerment and confidence in their professional 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.

- Networking is one of the most valued components of the Career Connections experience and alumni reported making professional connections among fellow alumni and the presenters. Despite making these connections during the seminar experience, alumni struggled to maintain and capitalize on connections after Career Connections ended.

Based on these findings, the evaluation offers the following recommendations for the Career Connections program:

The Career Connections team should align the goals and the intended audience of the programming in the design phase.

- Once there is alignment and clarity around the intention behind the Career Connections programming and who it is meant to serve, this should be made clear in any communications surrounding the event, both to alumni and presenters. This will allow for presenters to come prepared to meet the needs of their audience, and for alumni to opt into programs that will be useful to them and skip the ones that will not be.
- A special effort should be made to target specific Career Connections programming to sub-audiences who need more attention and support, such as those transitioning between sectors mid-career, or those who are fresh out of their exchange.

The current Career Connections programming is highly valued by alumni and should continue to support exchange alumni with professional development and networking opportunities to better reflect on and advance their careers by focusing on programming that is highly interactive and that will be immediately applicable and actionable to alumni, such as:

- Networking opportunities that can lead to friendships, professional collaborations, and mentoring outcomes across cohort type (i.e. a mix of exchange program type, age groups etc.)
- Workshops on topics like grant application writing, resume writing, navigating LinkedIn and USAJobs and how to best leverage exchange experience in the job market
- Workshops that cater to the needs of diverse target audiences with differing experience-levels and career paths
- Long-term programming that builds on knowledge across sessions in addition to one-time information-sharing and/or networking sessions

Furthermore, the Career Connections team should consider sending a pre-program survey to participants asking about their professional background (such as employment sector, years of experience, etc.). The results should be shared with presenters and used to direct programming.

The Career Connections team should develop a strategic communications plan, that includes the following elements:

- Consistent cadence of outreach and events – best practices indicate this is year-round engagement, focusing on once a quarter.
- Consistent outreach platform – primarily via email with supplemental contact through platforms like LinkedIn and Facebook groups.
- Incorporates past participant voices to communicate about and promote Career Connections programming – word of mouth advertising from satisfied and engaged alumni will help increase engagement.

The current program successfully utilized both virtual and in-person programming. Both models have strengths and weaknesses. Career Connections should continue to use in-person and virtual models where each best serves the content and consider how the two models could be joined in a hybrid model.

- The in-person model should be used for programming focused on prolonged engagement, networking, interactivity, and giving or providing feedback (like a resume workshop, or cocktail hour).
- The virtual model should be used for programming focused on information delivery, accessibility, and specificity (like a seminar on a niche topic like technology jobs in Southeast Asia).
- The hybrid model should be used for longitudinal learning and continued engagement (like a multisession program on writing cover letters or grant applications).

Participants report that Career Connections provides highly valuable networking and other professional development opportunities. Because of this, one of their most frequent requests was to provide opportunities for continued engagement with ECA, and other participants (presenters and alumni) in between seminars.

- Career Connections should utilize a variety of platforms for continued participant engagement (between alumni and presenters) after Career Connections events. This could be achieved with Facebook, WhatsApp, or LinkedIn Learning groups, and the alumni portal, as well as through the organization of happy hours and other in-person networking events based on geographic proximity and/or specific areas of interest.
- Career Connections should allow for passionate alumni to continue to be involved as presenters, encouraging them to think about what they might be able to offer to other alumni (especially more senior alumni).
- Career Connections should continue to gather feedback from participants and allow for their voice to be heard. This should include conducting a post-program survey which (among other things) solicits feedback on presenters' sessions.
- The Career Connections team should use continued engagement with program alumni as an opportunity to update their contact information, through either ongoing survey efforts or future program records.

EVALUATION PURPOSE AND EVALUATION QUESTIONS

EVALUATION PURPOSE

The purpose of the evaluation is to inform the next iteration of the award with participant-driven recommendations on how to strengthen the Career Connections program. The evaluation included participants (exchange program alumni and seminar presenters) involved in the Career Connections program from its inception in 2019 through calendar year 2020. This period included 635 program participants and 100 former presenters.

The evaluation was primarily conducted by the ECA Monitoring, Evaluation, Learning, and Innovation (MELI) unit, with support from the District Communications Group (DCG).

EVALUATION QUESTIONS

The evaluation was designed to answer the following questions:

1. Based on participant perspectives, is the Career Connections program following the right approach to providing professional development opportunities to American alumni?
 - a. Is the right content being delivered?
 - b. Do participants have any recommendations for different delivery mechanisms for the topics being taught?
 - c. Are the speakers and career experts invited to the workshops effective?
2. What are the *immediate* outcomes of Career Connections workshops?

PROGRAM BACKGROUND

The Career Connections program is managed by the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) Office of Alumni Affairs (OAA). Started in 2019, 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 invaluable networking opportunities for U.S. alumni with leaders in their communities. During COVID-19, the seminars have moved to the virtual environment and taken the form of one-time, in-depth workshops.

Activities 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.

EVALUATION DESIGN, METHODS, AND LIMITATIONS

This evaluation used a mixed method approach to analyze how participants perceive Career Connections seminars, identify best practices for professional development events and determine areas of improvement for Career Connections to continue to provide valuable offerings to ECA program alumni.

METHODS

ALUMNI SURVEY

The MELI team conducted an online survey using Qualtrics with two groups: (1) Career Connections participants; and (2) alumni that had not participated in Career Connections seminars. The survey was administered from June 7 to July 16, 2021 and was distributed via email and posted on various social media accounts. The survey closed with a 17 percent response rate for Career Connections participants¹ and 27 respondents that had not participated in Career Connections.²

LITERATURE REVIEW

DCG's evaluation team conducted a literature review of existing research on best practices in professional development training and alumni engagement. The review looked at peer-reviewed academic literature and grey literature, including market research and private sector reports on best practices for maintaining alumni engagement and expanding/improving upon professional development opportunities for their alumni networks. The literature review is in Annex IV.

EXPERT INTERVIEWS

DCG's evaluation team interviewed nine subject matter experts in alumni engagement and/or professional development across a diverse range of industries from academia to the private sector between July 6 and July 21, 2021. The goal was to gather information on cross-cutting best practices for conducting successful events and engaging program alumni long-term. DCG identified a selection of potential expert interviewees which were reviewed and approved by ECA. Potential interviewees were ranked by priority level by ECA for outreach. Outreach was conducted via email. Each potential interviewee in the top priority level was contacted twice before moving on to the second priority level contacts. This same strategy was used for all three

¹ The survey was distributed to 625 Career Connections participants, with 108 alumni responding to the survey.

² There are approximately 400,000 American alumni, the majority of which have not participated in Career Connections.

priority levels. Interviews were a mix of academics (2), university alumni office staff (1), for-profit alumni association staff (4), and non-profit alumni association staff (2). Interviews were conducted remotely via Microsoft Teams and lasted about 30-45 minutes. No incentives were offered to interviewees.

PRESENTER INTERVIEWS

DCG's evaluation team interviewed 15 seminar presenters between June 9 and July 2, 2021. Presenters represented a range of in-person and virtual Career Connections seminars.³ One presenter had also participated as an alumnus in a previous Career Connections event. The goal was to understand presenter opinions on what they saw that could be strengthened and gather recommendations on best practices based on their experience with professional development trainings. These interviews also added greater context to the insights shared in alumni interviews.

DCG selected potential interviewees from the complete list of approximately 100 presenters, prioritizing a) the number of seminars the presenter spoke at, b) the format of the seminar(s) they presented at (i.e., virtual, in-person, both virtual and in-person), c) the location of the seminar(s), and d) the topic category(ies) the presenter presented on. Based on these categories, presenters were divided into two priority levels. Outreach was conducted via email. Each potential interviewee in the top priority level was contacted twice before moving on to the second priority level contacts. Interviews were conducted remotely via Microsoft Teams and lasted about 30-45 minutes. No incentives were offered to interviewees.

ALUMNI INTERVIEWS

DCG was commissioned to carry out in-depth interviews with program alumni to provide qualitative context to the existing quantitative data. From July 9 to August 20, 2021, DCG's evaluation team completed 39 alumni interviews. Interview participants represented a mix of seminars: in-person (17), virtual (19), or both (3), and represented 13 ECA exchange programs.

Interview participants were selected from an existing participant contact database (~450 participants who registered and attended a seminar) and prioritized by a) number of seminars attended, b) format of seminar(s) attended (i.e., in-person or virtual), c) ECA program, d) year of ECA program, and e) gender. Based on these categories, alumni were divided into priority levels of 50-75 alumni each. Outreach was conducted via email. Each potential interviewee in the top priority level was contacted twice before moving on to the second priority level contacts. This same strategy was used for all priority levels until each Career Connections participant was given the opportunity to participate in an interview. Interviews were conducted remotely via Microsoft Teams and lasted about 20-30 minutes. No incentives were offered to interviewees.

³ Full breakdown of seminars found in Annex III

ANALYSIS

Upon completion of data collection, the DCG and ECA evaluation teams each carried out preliminary analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data. The ECA team used the Qualtrics data analysis platform to identify key descriptive statistics and preliminary findings emerging from the quantitative survey data. For qualitative interview data, the DCG team utilized a rigorous coding scheme informed by a) themes on alumni engagement and professional development identified in the literature review and b) grounded theory. During the open coding stage, DCG identified top-level themes from interview transcripts, including interviewee insights into expectations for Career Connections and reactions to seminar content and format (i.e., in-person, virtual). During the focused coding stage, DCG went line-by-line to identify nuance and subthemes, as well as supporting and contradictory quotes.

Following the preliminary analysis phase, the ECA and DCG teams convened virtually to conduct a rigorous, participatory 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.

CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

While the evaluation was completed without significant challenges, there are a few factors that possibly influenced the overall findings.

SURVEY RESPONSE RATE

Sample sizes for each respondent type and for each data collection method—both qualitative and quantitative—are relatively small. This is particularly true for the online survey. Evaluation results are, therefore, indicative of those who participated in the evaluation and not statistically representative of all program alumni.

SURVEY AND INTERVIEW CONFUSION

The alumni survey and outreach for alumni interviews occurred nearly simultaneously. Because of this, it is possible that alumni confused one method for the other and only replied to one. To reduce potential confusion, DCG included a clarifying statement in all alumni outreach emails distinguishing the interview request from the alumni survey.

ALUMNI INTERVIEW TIMELINE

The evaluation teams had less than two months to complete alumni interviews. Due to this short timeframe, only alumni who could be reached and were available to be interviewed within the two months allotted for interviews were included in the study. While the original goal was for the evaluators to interview up to 45 respondents, 39 interviews were completed.

ALUMNI CONTACT INFORMATION

The alumni database contained some gaps or erroneous/outdated contact information. Where secondary contact information was available, the DCG evaluation team sent follow-up emails using that information. Where not available, DCG marked alumni as unreachable. Out of ~450 potential interviewees, approximately 25 were unreachable

EVIDENCE AND FINDINGS

EVALUATION QUESTION 1: IS THE CAREER CONNECTIONS PROGRAM FOLLOWING THE RIGHT APPROACH TO PROVIDING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES?

INTENTIONS, GOALS, AND EXPECTATIONS

Overall, participants felt the Career Connections program was well implemented. Most participants (58 percent) found Career Connections to be more useful than other professional development opportunities. Additionally, a vast majority of respondents (82 percent) indicated they were satisfied with their Career Connections experience, with nearly all respondents (96 percent) indicating they would recommend the program to other alumni. However, there was a slight discrepancy between the two data points: 14 percent of respondents would recommend Career Connections but were neutral or worse about their overall experience with the program. This is likely due to some participants who felt the Career Connections program was not applicable to their needs, but still saw the value in the program for other alumni. This hypothesis is supported by alumni interviews in which several alumni reported that content did not quite meet their needs, but that they could see the value in the content for other alumni, specifically for less-experienced alumni.

Based on what you have been able to utilize from these other experiences, how does the Career Connections seminar compare?	%	Count
Much more useful	27%	26
Slightly more useful	31%	30
About the same	34%	33
Slightly less useful	6%	6
Much less useful	3%	3

Response Count = 98

Overall, how satisfied were you with your Career Connections experience?	%	Count
Extremely satisfied	41%	41
Moderately satisfied	42%	42
Neutral	13%	13
Moderately dissatisfied	2%	2
Extremely dissatisfied	1%	1

Response Count = 99

Would you recommend Career Connections to other alumni?	%	Count
Yes	96%	94
No	4%	4

Response Count = 98

Alumni interviewees provided several reasons for their satisfaction with the Career Connections program, including the opportunity to hear from presenters with diverse backgrounds and industry experience, which allowed for adequate exposure to new career pathways and opportunities. Alumni also provided positive feedback on several of the Career Connections seminar topics and formats that they felt worked especially well – including but not limited to workshops on resume writing, grant writing, and strategic use of LinkedIn, guidance on entrepreneurship, and networking opportunities. They found many of the topics to be influential and helpful in thinking about the next steps in their career.

"[I saw different career opportunities] through the presenter backgrounds. They had people from various sectors talking about their career paths and their work on these international projects. It was really cool to see all the possibilities that are out there that might not necessarily be highlighted otherwise." – Alum (In-person)

"They actually had us sit down with a former alumnus that is also working in the federal government currently and so they had some really awesome insights to share, that was really cool matchup that they had us do." – Alum (In-person)

"The presenter there talked about pretty much being an entrepreneur. And that was one of the only sessions that I heard a lot about entrepreneurship in, which I thought was helpful versus just looking for a career path and finding your dream job and things like that. It was just creating something that you're passionate about and using resources to make it happen." – Alum (In-person)

Alumni valued sessions with an immediate impact on their career. They particularly valued sessions that provided them with actionable or applicable content. Interviewees mentioned

resume review sessions, professional headshots, how to navigate LinkedIn and USAJobs, and grant-writing sessions as the most effective. In these sessions, alumni could see immediate outcomes such as an improved resume or new connections on LinkedIn, or they were provided with steps to take after the session to use in their career development.

"I do remember distinctively for their resume review, it was a round robin, which I think was great. So essentially, you just had your resume, you'd go to A, then you go to B, then you go to person C and then you have different feedback. And I think that was phenomenal without a doubt to have different perspectives, but that was the only session that did that." – Alum (Both)

"What session did I find useful? I did a one-on-one interview with someone...He was very direct, which I appreciated and sometimes we need that. [He told me] basically 'you have a great resume, it's just a matter of making a decision about what direction you want to take your career in.'" Alum (In-Person)

Interviewees expressed a desire for more, similar interactive and actionable sessions at future events. Specifically, they were interested in goal-setting sessions where they could map their desired career trajectory and determine concrete 'next steps' to move forward in their careers. Both alumni and presenters were also very interested in skills-based workshops where alumni could make progress in and receive feedback on projects or ideas.

"If you had a full day to really workshop the what ifs about somebody's project, or the students can talk to each other and say, 'I'd love to work with you on this,' a little bit of that can happen in a weekend. But if you had more days to do it, I think you could actually have projects that have the stamp of the program on them in a way that when they end up at Sundance Film Festival or they're on Netflix, they actually could directly trace it back to the lab that created them, or helped create them. So, I definitely am a fan of that kind of stuff." – Presenter (In-person)

Career Connections is inconsistent in establishing clear goals and expectations. Interviewees expressed some confusion and lack of clarity around Career Connections' intention and goal. They generally described the program as an opportunity to increase professional development but only vaguely understood the goals and motivations of the program. In line with professional development goals, some interviewees reported that one of the goals of Career Connections is to level the playing field for exchange program alumni. Others—most often presenters—shared that their understanding of ECA's big picture goal is to continue to invest in alumni in the hopes that these alumni may engage in public sector work and make positive, diplomatic change. Confusion around the goals and intended audience made some alumni question whether Career Connections was relevant for them at their specific point in their career.

"I think as a baseline, the State Department, as I understand it, really wanted to create community, a sense of community with their alumni, peer learning and professional development support. I think those were the goals of the conveners." – Presenter (In-person)

Expert interviewees asserted that the goals of an alumni engagement network or professional development programming must be very clearly defined to encourage alumni buy-in through a cohesive narrative. Clear goals also help set boundaries for programming. Some experts argued that, once interest areas have been identified, programming should not deviate from addressing those interest areas unless absolutely necessary.

"Once we were really clear about our vision, our 10-year goal, and then engaging our alumni around that, things got a lot easier. If it's just engage[ment] to engage, you can throw all the happy hours you want, but the moment that there's some real mission and values alignment, that's why the folks joined the organization to begin with. And so, it's been really motivating to pull them back in." – Expert (Non-Profit Alumni Engagement)

"One of the things is trying to gather them [alumni] around a purpose. It's not necessarily enough to say, 'Okay, you all studied with this program. So now, we're going to keep in touch in this program in the long-term.' ...So, another way we've tried to engage students and keep them engaged is trying to have that focus about, how do we connect you within professional spaces? Yes, you might've all taken this program, but are there sub-groups, committees, and things that we can support around your business students, your regional expertise, language? Often, we want to segment people into groups or subgroups where they're going to find the most value. And usually, when we're talking about student alumni groups, it's around work experience and career, and generating career opportunity." – Expert (Non-Profit Alumni Engagement)

Interviewees also noted that the communications around the Career Connections programming didn't clearly set expectations around how Career Connections is structured. Several alumni reported they had an expectation that Career Connections would be structured as a career fair, with an explicit focus on walking away with job opportunities.

"I think a lot of people had the impression that we were going to have job employers there. Like most people there thought, there'll be recruiters there and people hiring. It's good to have speakers, but I mean, this is not what we traveled all the way for. People traveled to get hired - we don't want unpaid internships because you can find that anywhere." – Alum (In-person)

"I think it is much more yeah, because a lot of people will say, "Oh my gosh, are you hiring?" I'm like, "No, sorry, I'm not hiring, but let me give you some skills that'll help you as you see these available jobs." And I think that one might be something we could do better [communicating] - it's not necessarily a career fair. It's not a, "I'm showing up with five positions I'm trying to fill." Rather, it's more, "I'm trying to help you think about how you navigate the world of jobs and careers going forward." – Presenter (Both)

However, after attending, interviewees reported that their Career Connections experience was more focused on networking and professional development, which was not clear to them in advance.

"I think it was just career exploration, tips and tricks, very tangible things around reviewing your resume and your cover letter, hearing about other people's career journeys, and then just networking and meeting other people like yourself as somebody who's gone on one of these fellowships or traveled abroad." – Presenter (In-person)

"In retrospect, it's mostly focused on career development and figuring out what to do post grant or kind of at a career junction. And then, there is an aspect of networking, so you meet a lot of different people who have pivoted their careers, or work in the State Department currently." – Alum (In-person)

Interviewees also expressed confusion around the themes that were provided for the in-person sessions. Alumni reported that the "themes" of some of the events were confusing, not well-publicized, and did not always connect well to the event activities.

"The New York Career Connections was on media literacy. And I feel a lot of people didn't understand the concept and even I didn't and I did my masters in communication. So that was the first time I heard the term. So, I'm just trying to break it down in my head for a long time. And it's a lot of, they had this panel discussion that was very good, but that's if you understood what media literacy was about. And after a while, people were, you could see their eyes are glazing over." – Alum (In-person)

"It wasn't actually well communicated that that was the subtheme until I was there, which honestly it wouldn't have changed it. I thought it was really fascinating, but it was just really funny. But as I was there, they were like, "Oh yes. And the subtheme of this program is media literacy." And I was like, "I didn't realize these had sub themes, but okay." – Alum (In-person)

Across in-person and virtual programming, Career Connections is inconsistent in establishing an intentional audience for the programming. Such inconsistency creates

confusion for both alumni and presenters and reduces participants' perceived value of Career Connections. This inconsistency presented itself in two general ways: 1) programming was too broad and tried to provide content for a wide audience; and 2) programming was most often geared towards alumni with less career experience and presented basic information on career development.

Some interviewees felt that Career Connections programming was too vague and did not provide enough of a deep dive into the nuances of career development. To capture the widest audience, the seminar content tended to present the basics around topics like navigating USAJobs or writing a resume.

"I don't think anybody's [Career Connections staff/implementing partner] doing anything wrong. I just think everybody's trying to be everything to everyone." – Alum (In-person)

"I think it's something that can definitely be worked on...trying to be more deliberate and choosing their presentations and collecting more demographic information of the participants to be more focused on the content shared." – Alum (Both)

Alumni and presenters suggested that making the intended audience for each session clear could improve satisfaction with programming. When the presenters have demographic data on attendees, they are better able to tailor content to the group. Likewise, when alumni understand the target audience of a session, they can choose the sessions that will be most pertinent to their needs.

"I think it's always really helpful to give participants as much information as possible before the sessions, so they really know what to expect, especially because so much of it is self-selected. They have a choice of sessions to attend. I think arming them with as much information as possible would be useful" – Presenter (In-person)

"We presented on a new [to Career Connections] topic. And I think in that case, we would have benefited from surveying the audience or the group beforehand. Really specific areas of need, and then be able to speak to those...We had a bit more of a mix [of alumni at different professional stages]. When you have that diversity of experience around the table, they're going to have different questions. And so, the best way to serve that is to be able to maybe have a survey or ask questions beforehand and then come in armed and able to speak to those things or segment the group even further and have mid-career professionals here and early career professionals there so that you can target or highlight things that are hyper effective to what their needs are in that moment." – Presenter (In-person)

Based on other interviews with more recent presenters, it appears Career Connections has identified this as an area of improvement already and has begun to provide presenters with audience demographic information prior to the sessions so that presenters can better tailor their content to the needs of the group.

To meet the needs and interests of a diverse alumni audience it is often necessary to create programming that is relevant regardless of life or career stage and “*build the skills that transcend roles.*” However, it is also important to adapt offerings based on alumni interests and ability to engage over time as they reach new stages in their personal and professional careers. One expert interviewee gave the example that alumni caring for children or aging parents may not be able to attend happy hours but may participate in virtual support groups or seminars. Recognizing changes in alumni life stages can also help to explain ebbs and flows of engagement.

“Another best practice I am seeing [is] more and more towards personalization. So, from affinity groups, to industry groups, generation groups, gender groups, or what you can imagine, like sexual orientation, LGBTQ groups, to try to provide more and more personalization.” – Expert (Private Sector Alumni Engagement)

Low engagement does not always indicate a lack of interest but can demonstrate changing priorities. Providing value-added resources to alumni based on changing priorities also increases their likelihood of responsiveness to alumni network “asks,” such as requests to fill out surveys. However, organizations must be careful to avoid repetitive “asks” to more responsive alumni, as this could create burnout over time.

Participants perceived that Career Connections is narrowly focused on the needs of those early in their career. Alumni interviewees shared that the content presented during seminars focused on basic or introductory information and processes for initial entry into the job market. Because of this, a majority of alumni interviewed asserted that Career Connections programming is focused on less experienced alumni and does not include enough information for mid-career alumni or alumni who are at a transitioning point in their careers. This finding is particularly striking because survey analysis reveals that a majority of the respondents were already members of the workforce at the time of participation, indicating that general sessions on entry into the workforce may not be as relevant. Specifically, most respondents (52 percent) were employed or seeking employment (25 percent) when they participated in Career Connections. A smaller group were studying (15 percent) or both working and studying (6 percent). The survey did not reveal how many years of work experience each respondent had at the time that they participated in Career Connections.

What was your professional status when you participated in Career Connections?	%	Count
Employed	52%	54
Seeking employment	25%	26
Studying	15%	16
Both working and studying	6%	6
Other	2%	2

Response Count = 104

Furthermore, interviewees often expressed that content was vague and did not consider the wealth of experiences held by mid-career alumni.

"To be honest, I don't feel like I learned a whole lot from that session. I think it was very helpful for people who really had no experience working with DOS or just were very new to the idea of the foreign service. But, I think, because I had taken a test once and I'd spoken to a lot of people who were in foreign service, I didn't learn a lot of new things. I think it felt very, very like foreign service 101." – Alum (Virtual)

Several alumni spoke about the resume review session as an example, arguing that reviewers were not prepared to help more experienced alumni create a cohesive narrative in their resume based on their more extensive job experience. Others were looking to switch from the private to public sector, or vice versa, and wanted more content and presenters that could provide advice on how to market their transferrable skills to change careers. Some alumni argued that, by homing in on early-career alumni, Career Connections is narrowly defining professional development as helpful only to those starting their career, rather than as a career-long process.

"The emails that go out, it just seems like they're constantly talking about educational opportunities, networking opportunities, and just developing those soft skills, so LinkedIn profile and your resume. And it's like, "Okay, what about us? We already have a career that we want. We're trying to further our professional development." – Alum (Both)

Similarly, some alumni argued that by not focusing programming on mid-career alumni, Career Connections was missing out on an important and potentially helpful demographic. By including mid-career alumni more intentionally, there could be more enriching opportunities for alumni to network and mentor cross-generationally.

“I don't know if somebody mid-career then might not have found as much benefit in it if the majority of people were early career, or if maybe there's an opportunity in the future to break people out based on their career level? I think there's a lot of benefit in having mid-career people, everybody needs networking and opportunities to grow.” – Presenter (In-person)

Interviews with professional development and alumni networking experts support these findings. Experts asserted that successful programming must be responsive to the needs and wants of alumni and offer opportunities, resources, and activities that address their specific interests and skill levels.

Participants perceived that Career Connections is targeted towards a government-track audience. Although participants felt that Career Connections has not clearly defined its intended audience, they highlighted that the majority of the programming focused on content helpful to those alumni most interested in a government career, particularly the Foreign Service or Department of State track, or a position in the D.C. area more broadly. Interviewees expressed a desire for a wider range of industries (i.e., entrepreneurship, technology, engineering, etc.) to be represented at Career Connections, including opportunities for those individuals unable to move to D.C. or other major cities.

“They could have also mentioned alternate careers...like maybe the travel industry or airline or something like that, or maybe how to build your own entrepreneurial business...I'm not sure it's great for everyone, but if you want to go into like the politics, then yeah, if you're willing to do unpaid internships, then great.” – Alum (In-person)

“I lived in Silicon Valley...and at that time, I wasn't ready for a move. I really wanted to stay in Silicon Valley and also do this internationally focused work. And in the seminar, I wasn't the only person who asked that question. But across the board, the question we asked is, how do we do this kind of work without moving to DC? And almost universally, the answer we got was, ‘Well, move to DC’. Which was not what I hoped for.” – Alum (In-person)

Many interviewees recognized that a sizeable number of ECA program alumni are interested in international careers, but may not be looking for careers in the public sector or have the desire or the means to relocate to D.C. Indeed, alumni represented a range of job sectors. Respondents to the survey reported working in a range of job sectors, including for-profit (30 percent), non-profit (29 percent), university (24 percent), government (13 percent), and other (5 percent).

In which sector is your job?	%	Count
For-profit	30%	25
Non-profit	29%	24
University	24%	20
Government	13%	11
Other	5%	4

Response Count = 84

OUTREACH AND COMMUNICATIONS

With regard to outreach and communications from ECA, alumni interviewees expressed that they value consistency in communication mode and platform – with email being the most consistent and reliable form of communication. The vast majority (75 percent) of survey respondents heard about Career Connections via email. The other responses were mixed, reporting a variety of other avenues of hearing about Career Connections. No respondents indicated hearing about Career Connections via Twitter or the website (alumni.state.gov).

How did you hear about the Career Connections seminar?	%	Count
Email	75%	78
Facebook	8%	8
Other	5%	5
Was mentioned in my ECA program	4%	4
Was mentioned at an official event I attended (at an Embassy overseas, speech by a State Department official, etc.)	4%	4
Another alumni told me about the Career Connections program	3%	3
LinkedIn	2%	2
Twitter	0%	0
Website	0%	0

Response Count = 104

While alumni interviewees appreciated Career Connections communications coming from several sources, they preferred communications that are consistent and consolidated in one place for easy reference and reminders. While email was deemed the most reliable avenue of receiving information, alumni noted LinkedIn and the Facebook groups as helpful supplemental resources to reinforce what is coming across via email. Platforms like LinkedIn and Facebook are particularly helpful in providing reminders for upcoming events and offering quick soundbites on the events for those who do not have the bandwidth to sift through their email. However, it is important that the communication comes consistently through all platforms so that participants know where to look for information about the program and how to sign up for events.

“I end up usually going through the stuff that comes through the email because there is a bit of an overlap with email and LinkedIn. But what they post on LinkedIn, it helps reinforce what's out there.” – Alum (Virtual)

“They sent the reminder emails that were helpful and then I'm part of the Facebook and the LinkedIn group, so I just get their notifications from those. But yeah, honestly with my work schedule, I am very busy, so I haven't had a lot of time to review all of the content over... Even if it was emailed to me, I haven't always looked through it in detail.” – Alum (Virtual)

Consistent communication across all platforms might also help to engage the alumni who are not currently engaging in Career Connections programming. Survey respondents who had not participated in Career Connections reported that they did not participate because they have never heard of the program (44 percent), are not eligible to participate (22 percent)⁴, were not interested in the topics offered (11 percent), or because seminars were not offered near them (7 percent). Clear and consistent communication diversified across platforms can help to address this lack of knowledge about the program and potentially increase participation in events.

“Everything seemed hodgepodge pieced together as in I'm in the LinkedIn group and sometimes I'll see things to that. We sometimes will get emails about that, but it'll be two days before. The State Department website is also not very user-friendly so obtaining relevant information about what is going on and what I'm interested in, and how to sign up isn't as straight forward as it is for other areas. Streamlining that would be helpful.” – Alum (Virtual)

Interviewees preferred a regular cadence of outreach from ECA about Career

Connections' activities. In order to maintain year-round engagement (and make sure any events and opportunities are well-publicized), alumni and presenters advocated for a steady stream of outreach throughout the year. However, they emphasized that it would be especially important to increase outreach and marketing to those who are newly graduated from their exchange program and might need additional support and guidance as they transition out.

“I also feel like there's a lot of uncertainty when you exit the program. And so, a lot of people are looking for a bit more guidance in that. It definitely felt like the program would be perfect for that, or even kids straight out of college who have done State Department programs during their time abroad or during their college career.” – Alum (In-person)

⁴ Those not eligible to participate could not do so because they were foreign citizens.

"When you come back from a Fulbright, you come back from any type of experience, how do you apply that in your community? How do you make change in your community? I'd love to see that kind of support and guidance." – Presenter (In-person)

These findings were supported by conversations with alumni engagement experts, who shared that timely and appropriate outreach coupled with marketing and content which sparks interest can encourage increased participation in professional development and alumni networking events. Outreach should take advantage of multiple platforms such as social media, program-specific email listservs, and local alumni group networks to reach a wide array of potential participants.

However, diversity of channels should be balanced by timely contact. Most experts agreed that once a month is the most frequent that an organization should send email updates. Several experts further argued that quarterly is the “industry standard” unless an organization is sending reminder emails to alumni who have signed up for events. One expert contended that organizations “*get away with spamming*” more frequently on Facebook and other social media platforms where regular updates are the norm. Additionally, utilizing past participants to promote events can improve sign-up and attendance rates as fellow alumni in particular are perceived as trustworthy and unbiased sources of information.

“The idea’s that we engage with them [alumni] regularly. Our target is quarterly engagement...Every other month connect or even monthly, but we consider that a lot. Our targets, and what I have seen in the industry, is quarterly engagement.” – Expert (Private Sector Alumni Engagement)

“Stuff that is coming specifically from an email newsletter is once a month... [On the] alumni Facebook group, there might be a day, if I have five opportunities come through on the same day, all five are going to be thrown up onto that wall. And you’re going to have the opportunity to look at it.” – Expert (Non-profit Alumni Engagement)

Alumni networks require comprehensive and regularly updated contact databases to share opportunities, updates, and resources. Many experts recommend utilizing a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) platform like Salesforce to compile contact information in a centralized location. Some experts recommend a yearly alumni survey to keep contact information up to date. To increase responsiveness to these surveys, they should be kept short and framed in a way that highlights benefits to the alumni upon completion. For example, if an alumnus/alumna updates their job status through the survey, the organization could offer information on opportunities and resources tailored to alumni interests. Maintaining good records also reduces the burden on alumni because programs no longer need to reach out frequently for updated contact information.

“We are really thoughtful about the ‘asks.’ For instance, legislation that will be posed that we need to oppose in the state legislative, we will make sure that we’re reaching out to a wide variety of our alum [sic] and not just always tapping the same alumni over and over and over again until they’re like, ‘Come on, you all. I’m exhausted and I don’t work for you.’ That’s where Salesforce comes in because we’re able to see the last time our media team reached out to them [alumni] recently.” – Expert (Non-profit Alumni Engagement)

Finally, to cultivate buy-in into the alumni network and its activities, ECA exchange program participants should be indoctrinated into the alumni network and made aware of its resources/events before the end of their program term. Once participants leave a program, it can be difficult to recapture their attention. Educating them on the resources and opportunities available through their alumni network before the program finishes or, as some experts recommended, in pre-program orientation, can increase their likelihood of engaging with the network. To increase long-term interest in the alumni network, it may be helpful to frame it as a way in which to connect over “shared experiences,” as this helps to bond participants to one another across programs and across program years.

“You don’t want to just start trying to engage them as an alumni after the fact. What you want to make sure you’re doing is you’re bringing them on... When they come into the program, they’re part of something from there. And it’s, how do you connect, carry that experience through, right? Because it’s the real connections that they’ve made, whether it’s studying virtually together or in person together or what not, that they’ve made in their school, that they’re looking to keep. And so, it’s really about, okay, when you’re thinking about planning for alumni engagement, you’re thinking about it from pre studies, basically.” – Expert (Non-profit Alumni Engagement)

MODELS: VIRTUAL, IN-PERSON, AND HYBRID

Interviewees valued in-person programming for its interactivity and the depth of social connection. Alumni reported that there was a good mix of session formats available at the in-person events. However, they strongly preferred interactive sessions in which they could connect with peers, potential mentors, or other professional contacts. These sessions included resume workshops, networking opportunities, and off-site field trips. In contrast with traditional lecture-style or PowerPoint presentations, interactive sessions offered participants the opportunity to contribute to conversations and engage with others. Both alumni and presenters preferred interactive sessions as they felt that they “*got more out of it*” by asking questions and engaging in discussions rather than just receiving information from a presenter/lecturing to a group of alumni.

"I think one-on-ones or small groups could have absolutely strengthened the in-person kinds of things. When they're just giant groups, you don't get what you really want, and come for because there are just too many other people vying for your time." – Alum (In Person)

Interviewees also expressed that smaller groups and one-on-one engagements could be more inclusive of shyer participants who may not speak out in large group settings.

"Especially if you've got somebody who's a little shy and a little soft spoken, for those of us who know how to raise our voice, it's one thing. But it really disadvantages those folks who maybe are a little more introverted in that regard." – Presenter (Both)

A desire for greater interactivity was particularly acute among virtual participants who felt that virtual seminars did not allow them to network or explore socially as they might at in-person experiences.

"I think what you lose is that humanity, that being next to someone and then sensing. Also for the presenter, sensing the reaction in the room can be important. And so, we lost a little bit of that when we get into virtual." – Presenter (In-person)

Virtual participants recognized the difficulty of including an interactive element to the digital format and identified the virtual space as the most well-suited to information-sharing rather than personal engagement. Most participants that attended both in-person and virtual seminars also preferred the interactive nature of the in-person event environment for the informal and spontaneous connections they could make with other participants (i.e., hallway chat).

"I think what in-person activities do really well is allow for connections. Also, we forget that walking to get a glass of water is when you meet people or in lunch." – Alum (In-person)

"It was great to meet all the other participants in the conference and sort of learn where they were, what they were looking for. It turns out we're all looking for basically the same thing or pretty similar things. So yeah, just, I mean, being able to network with them while we were all there in the same room was really beneficial too." – Alum (In-person)

Eighty percent of survey respondents that attended both in-person and virtual Career Connections seminars felt that the in-person Career Connections experience was better than the

virtual experience. No respondents felt the virtual experience was better. Although the sample size for this survey question was small, qualitative interviews corroborate this finding.

How would you compare your in-person and virtual Career Connections experiences?	%	Count
My in-person experience was better	80%	12
My virtual experience was better	0%	0
My experiences were the about the same	20%	3

Response Count = 15

In-person participant interviewees were adamant that an in-person component to Career Connections should be maintained and suggested that more interactive activities and sessions should be included. When asked in the survey what changes they would make to the Career Connections seminar, participants selected more time for mentorship (62 percent), more interactive workshops (49 percent), and more time for networking (41 percent), as well as offering a wider variety of topics (38 percent), more time for resume assistance (28 percent), and making each seminar longer (19 percent). Each of these responses demonstrates a keen interest in face-to-face engagement, indicating participants perceived value of this aspect of a professional development event.

What changes would you make to the Career Connections seminar? Select all that apply.	%	Count
Provide more time for one-on-one/mentorship opportunities at the seminar	62%	60
Focus more on interactive workshops	49%	48
Provide more time for networking	41%	40
Offer a wider variety of topics at each seminar	38%	37
Provide more time for resume assistance	28%	27
Make each seminar longer (currently, each seminar is 2 days)	19%	18
Other	13%	13
None	8%	8

Response Count = 97

On the other hand, virtual programming offers reach in terms of accessibility and convenience benefits. While in-person events allow for organic interaction and networking, they can be exclusive to those with the time and financial resources to participate. Additionally, some interviewees shared that there are challenges associated with in-person lodging, including discomfort with new roommates.

Virtual programming offers greater flexibility and can be more inclusive of individuals from diverse socio-economic, geographic, and demographic backgrounds. They eliminate the need for

travel and the financial implications associated with it. Virtual seminars can also bring international communities and information to locations outside of major cities, allowing a number of alumni to engage in internationally-oriented work without having to move. Additionally, some experts posit that virtual events can also reduce barriers to participation for non-native English speakers and hard-of-hearing or deaf individuals if closed-captioning is offered during sessions (live or recorded). Virtual events can also be financially beneficial for organizers. Because of these benefits, professional development or other educational activities can be made virtual and still provide value to participants.

"I do think one of the strong points of virtual that would not really work in-person is you can attend one session at a time, or you can attend for just 60 minutes or 90 minutes. And of course, with an in-person seminar, not only is it a commitment to getting there, but you're committed effectively the whole weekend, or the whole two days of the session. Versus if you just really need help on a resume, and you sign up for that session online, and it's 60 to 90 minutes, I think that's a huge benefit." – Presenter (In-person)

"I enjoy doing international work and it is not easy to find international projects, especially being in the Midwest because there aren't the same kind of connections as you might see in, say New York or Boston. So, it takes a little more effort to be able to find things. I like that a lot of the work that's available through the Career Connections or at least linking to different initiatives, would enable me to see things that I probably would have a harder time finding out on my own." – Alum (Virtual)

Virtual formats often lack the interactive benefits of in-person events and make it difficult to maintain prolonged engagement. Many participants discussed how “Zoom fatigue”—exhaustion during and after attending virtual events—also reduces engagement and can lead to participants dropping off the call in the middle of a session.

"[There is] no engagement from the audience. So, it's just like watching a recording almost." – Alum (Virtual)

"Some of them seemed a bit long. For me personally, I can do about one hour of Zoom and then anything beyond one hour is tedious and taxing. Some of them went a bit beyond that." – Alum (Virtual)

This downside is exacerbated by technological difficulties. Several participants mentioned that certain platforms, like WHOVA, were not effective tools for the Career Connections seminars. Interviewees that participated in multiple virtual sessions asserted that using a platform that more people are familiar with, like Zoom, is more effective even though it may not have all the features of a more advanced event platform.

"I think [WHOVA] tries to accomplish a lot of things and tries to model what an actual conference would be like. The problem is, we were having people come in or I was seeing people come in sporadically. They would attend a session and then there wasn't really anything to keep them there." – Alum (In-person)

Expert interviews reiterated the distinctions between in-person and virtual events and suggested that each format be utilized to its strengths. In-person events are the most effective for relationship-building, interactivity, and engagement. They allow for organic and spontaneous interaction and can more easily offer a variety of activities such as happy hours, networking events, poster sessions, presentations, panels, and workshops. Experts stressed that in-person events are particularly important for successful alumni engagement as face-to-face interactions are critical for relationship-building. Peer-to-peer networking allows alumni to reflect on shared experiences, build strong bonds associated with their program experience, learn about the professional trajectories of their peers, and leverage relationships in their personal and professional growth. To encourage follow-up and long-term engagement, organizations may provide an open list of attendees with names, pictures, and contact information for platforms such as LinkedIn or Twitter for each event or activity so that fellow alumni are able to contact one another virtually after the event is over.

"True relationship connection happens in person. As much as we love to say Zoom has been a great proxy, I haven't found it to my own experience to be a replacement. So, building relationships, forming really good foundations together, then supplemented by the online quicker hit check-ins that may be virtual." – Expert (Private Sector Alumni Engagement)

Virtual events are best suited for information-sharing as they allow for flexibility in scheduling and can be catered to specific topic areas. However, experts agreed that encouraging and providing space for interactivity in virtual spaces is necessary to ensure engagement so that participants feel as though the content adds value. Attrition rates for virtual events are high due to Zoom fatigue or individuals *"over-signing-up"* for events because of perceived ease of participation (i.e., sign up and attendance seemingly require little effort on the part of the participant). Additionally, one expert argued that virtual events actually take *"double the time"* as in-person events because of technical issues (i.e., bandwidth, participant or speaker technical difficulties, etc.) which can increase Zoom fatigue. To address this, it is necessary to stick to strict time schedules and either make sessions shorter or break up the sessions with related activities. Other experts discussed adding in regular breakout rooms and built-in breaks so that participants can step away from the screen and reenergize themselves.

"What sometimes is difficult when you have these large webinar formats is you have the people whose personalities are going to be raise your hand and ask the first question, and then a lot of people who are going to sit back and listen. And those people don't have as much of the opportunity to interact, where a small group breakout forces everyone to speak a little bit." – Presenter (Virtual)

On reducing Zoom fatigue: *"For the Q&A, we have 20 minutes. There are five speakers. I did this last year intentionally. I put my phone next to the microphone, so the speaker would know."* – Expert (Alumni Engagement Scholar)

Hybrid options could optimize the benefits of virtual and in-person formats while mitigating potential drawbacks. Participant and expert interviewees suggested several methods for establishing a hybrid Career Connections model (see Annex IV for additional suggestions). However, a general model emerged centering a large, one-time in-person event with virtual touch points for participants to reconnect at regular intervals after the initial event. These virtual meetings could be for workshops where interested participants could build on more baseline skills learned in the main event. They could also be smaller networking opportunities for participants in similar geographic regions or with similar professional interests to connect.

"We loved face-to-face events and we still consider that it's an important part of human connection in the Alumni side. But we discovered that it's okay to organize virtual webinars and we can invite all the countries at the same time... Our hybrid model will go to, when we connect face-to-face, let's focus on the human interaction. That's the magic when we connect. And then, let's give the training and the content for the virtual work."
– Expert (Private Sector Alumni Engagement)

POST-EVENT CONNECTIONS AND FOLLOW-UP

Participants shared a desire for a continued engagement with each other after the Career Connections event. Many alumni wanted the opportunity for more networking opportunities, either virtual or in-person, following their Career Connections experience. They expressed a need for follow-up resources that would set them up to continue those relationships with a low barrier to access. At a baseline, Career Connections could provide contact information for all of the participants (alumni and presenters alike) which would allow for easy communication between participants and an ability to keep the conversation going after the seminar ends. Similarly, platforms like the alumni website (Alumni.state.gov), Facebook or LinkedIn groups could be used as spaces for alumni and presenters to offer opportunities for collaboration or support after Career Connections has ended.

"But it would've been great, comparing to other seminars that I've attended before with different agencies, is sending follow-up and be like, "Okay, here's a list of everyone's name and their LinkedIn profile if they're willing to connect and continue a conversation," as opposed to doing it on my own time, I think that would have been really, really beneficial." – Alum (Both)

"Posting potential projects on alumni website: "So that kind of a matchmaking service, where person A, who's leading, can provide a description of the intended project and what kind of help would be beneficial. And then person B, who's looking for something, would be able to read through and say, "Oh, okay, that would be a good match." – Alum (Virtual)

In addition to cultivating the relationships they develop at Career Connections, participants welcomed opportunities for future learning and development. They felt that the seminars could be supplemented by additional resources recommended by the presenters to keep the learning and growing going even after the seminar has ended. Presenters and alumni both recommended the alumni portal as a space to house supplemental resources for continued learning to build upon what is already being shared.

"They walked us through how to sign into the portal that they've been vamping up. So by physically bringing it up on the screen, showing us where to find different resources that are available for alumni was so helpful. Because we had talked about it in the first two, and I'm like, "Yeah, yeah, I'll do that. I'll do that at some point," and then I never did. So them actually bringing it up on the screen was really helpful, and I could use that." – Presenter (In-person)

"I think it would have been great to have a follow up email saying, "Okay, this is what the presenter wanted to continue to discuss. Here's more content. This would allow for continuous learning because I felt like it was just one off." – Alum (Both)

Outside of forming and fostering their Career Connections relationships, participants wanted to stay involved with ECA and the Career Connections team. Alumni and presenters shared that they would like to be kept informed of any future events and opportunities. Several alumni interviewees expressed a desire to become more involved in the planning and execution of the seminars as future presenters or even event organizers. However, for the engagement with Career Connections to continue, participants shared that improved, and perhaps additional, platforms for communication with ECA would be helpful. Some participants mentioned that social media, specifically, could be leveraged to promote continued engagement with the Career Connections program and community. To come back to Career Connections with an improved presentation, presenters noted that they would welcome additional feedback on how their session went.

"If you want to develop a strong alumni network, that's the best way to do it right there...The opportunity to come back or to present. I volunteer to present and I think I have a suggestion for a really good topic and it's something I would have wanted to hear." – Alum (In-person)

"Yeah, I wanted to continue to be involved in Career Connections and felt that I was not the best fit to go as a participant. But I did want to continue to be involved. So I thought I would have something to contribute as a presenter." – Presenter (In-person)

"And I think, as it relates to Career Connections, I think that the big piece maybe that's missing is the outreach from a social media standpoint. I don't know what tools they might leverage from a social media standpoint with Facebook or Instagram or otherwise, but I think that that is probably the easiest most cost-effective way to try to create more year-round conversation or more engagement with the audience." – Presenter (In-person)

"They have faith in the presenters, so that's great, but that could be an area where they could definitely engage a little bit more to improve the sessions. I was confident in what I submitted and presented, but if they really wanted to have more of a hand in it, they could give feedback back to the presenters after seeing their slides, or even having a mock presentation, but I know it would require a lot more hours." – Presenter (In-person)

Alumni appreciate opportunities to provide feedback and recommendations about Career Connections. This was visible in the number of alumni who were willing to engage in this research effort – 39 alumni were willing to take 30 minutes out of their day to provide feedback in an interview and 135 alumni willing to take a survey to help improve the program. It is clear that alumni want to be included and appreciate their voices being heard by the Career Connections team.

This is supported by the recommendation from several alumni engagement experts that event programming must be responsive to alumni wants and needs. Similar to appropriate goal-setting, successful programming must be responsive to the needs and wants of alumni and offer opportunities, resources, and activities that address their specific interests and skill levels. Through surveys and evaluations, organizations can determine the topics most interesting to alumni and tailor programming to meet those interests. Alumni can also take part in molding the programming and engagement process by actively sharing opportunities and resources with fellow alumni. Alumni can send in job postings, project opportunities, or other professional development resources to the organization via email or through a designated form (i.e. a Google form which is keyword searchable) to be distributed among the alumni network.

“One thing I can say that is not exclusive to virtual or pandemic times is we had done some alumni surveying a couple of years ago. What we got out of that survey was five areas where alumni are looking for programming and are looking for information. That helps set our programming because we know that those are the five things alumni care about, and so it has to be a really good reason why we would do a program that doesn't fit into one of those five categories. So that sort of baseline information about what people want has been really helpful.” – Expert (University Alumni Engagement)

Importantly, alumni reported that they felt the implementing partners were responsive to participants' desired topics, interests, and needs when they provided feedback on certain topics.

"But one thing I really appreciated is that the surveys after each career connection, I always filled them out and whenever they would ask for what are you looking for? I would opine. And the team made that happen. It really felt like they were nimble enough to quickly process feedback and then design something within a few weeks. So it wouldn't be like, okay, we'll get that on the for next semester. It was like, okay, that'll be on for next month. So I appreciated that agility.” – Alum (Virtual)

EVALUATION QUESTION 2: WHAT ARE THE IMMEDIATE OUTCOMES OF CAREER CONNECTIONS WORKSHOPS?

CONFIDENCE IN CAREER NEXT STEPS

Coming out of their Career Connections experience, alumni reported a greater sense of empowerment and confidence in their professional skills. The increased empowerment and confidence came in multiple forms: increased energy during the job search process, greater confidence in one's career aspirations, and a sense of improved soft skills to help them achieve it. Alumni felt that being surrounded by other people who are in the same position (searching for jobs, looking to develop professionally) allowed a system of group support that fostered confidence as they pursue their desired career path.

"I realized that the Career Connection seminar was really about building your confidence in the job hunt. And it certainly did that for me.... It was worthwhile, and I really appreciated that I had that opportunity.... At the time I had been out of a graduate program in film for at least six months and kind of floating and not feeling confident in how I was going about the job hunt. And I really felt confident when I was surrounded by other people that were in the same game with me and even though we weren't looking for the same work at all, even though I felt a little this weird third wheel, or a little black

sheep over here, the film maker and everybody else's not in that field, that was totally fine." – Alum (In-person)

Hearing about other peoples' experiences with imposter syndrome, failures, and rejections also emboldened alumni not to fear rejection or allow it to hold them back from pursuing potential opportunities and career paths. Specifically, hearing from successful presenters on their imposter syndrome and experiences with rejection validated the concerns and hesitations of alumni while encouraging them to pursue their own passions without fear of failure.

"So I think that the [Career Connections seminar] put my career into perspective but also gave me the confidence to apply to [opportunities] without being scared of being rejected." – Alum (In-person)

"This has happened in several sessions that I've been in where the career professionals have talked about the general term we use now is like imposter syndrome, that feeling of like, "Oh, I'm not prepared for this job or I'm not qualified or someone better should have this job." And a lot of people in the sessions have talked about, "Oh, I still feel that way. I've worked in this job for 15 years and I still feel like 'why did they hire me'" – Alum (Virtual)

The practice and development of soft skills (like networking) at Career Connections seminars bolstered this increased self-confidence. Alumni left the seminars feeling more practiced in critical professional development skills that made them feel even more capable of their career aspirations.

"Every time you go to a networking event, I think you kind of walk away with a bit more confidence in your ability to network and meet people." - Alum (In-person)

"I know I definitely developed a lot of my soft skills from that seminar and I was able to expand my network. I actually met one individual that literally just gave me a completely different perspective on the international development sector. And I strongly believe, if I didn't make that connection I wouldn't be where I'm at right now." – Alum (In-person and virtual).

Participants use this increased self-confidence and newly improved set of soft skills to inform and support next steps in their careers. Survey respondents used what they learned at Career Connections in a variety of ways, including: applying for a new job (49 percent), networking (47 percent), looking for internships (22 percent), applying for grad school (14 percent), and finding a mentor (8 percent). Career Connections provided a reaffirmation of a desired career path for some, encouraging them to take the next step in that direction—whether it

be graduate school or applying for a new job. For others, Career Connections opened their eyes to new opportunities, encouraging them to pivot into formerly unpursued directions.

"Before Career Connections, I met up with some people on a whim and we were talking about urban planning and that sort of thing. And then when I got to Career Connections, that kind of came out more as we did our little networking sessions and I started talking to people about public transit. And they were like, "You should really make a career out of public transit." And so I ended up starting a master's program on a whim right after the Career Connection." – Alum (In-person)

"[It] just reminded me of all of the opportunities that are out there to do things that would be a better fit with my passion, with my interests, and with what I really enjoy from a day-to-day job function." – Alum (In-person)

How have you been able to use your Career Connections Seminar? Select all that apply.	%	Count
In searching and applying for a new job	49%	50
Networking	47%	48
In searching and applying for an internship or fellowship	22%	22
I have not been able to use my Career Connections experience	18%	18
In applying for graduate school	14%	14
Finding a mentor	8%	8
Other	8%	8

Response Count = 102

Alumni used various components of the Career Connections seminars to pursue these next steps and new directions. The three most commonly used components were networking (70 percent), resume-building (65 percent), and job search skills (65 percent).

Skills used	Yes		No		Total	
Resume-Building	65%	61	35%	33	100%	94
Developing a Personal Brand	41%	38	59%	54	100%	92
Job Search Skills	65%	61	35%	33	100%	94
Pathways to Careers in the U.S. Government	52%	48	48%	45	100%	93
Networking	70%	66	30%	28	100%	94
Developing an Online Presence	43%	40	57%	52	100%	92
Job Interviewing	45%	41	55%	50	100%	91

Alumni interviewees who had been unable to use their Career Connections experience most often shared that they were still in school and not yet pursuing a career path or that the content did not meet their higher experience levels and was therefore inapplicable in their current career paths.

FORMING AND SUSTAINING PROFESSIONAL CONNECTIONS

Networking is one of the most highly valued components from the Career Connections program and participants reported making professional connections among fellow alumni and the presenters. Among alumni, some of the relationships formed were based on their formed camaraderie from their shared experience living abroad – coming out of Career Connections, these translated into supportive groups of likeminded friends.

"It was just nice, because as an American, not so many people study abroad, so it was just nice to have that connection with a bunch of other people and know that we did a great thing. One of them actually just slept on my floor for two weeks while apartment hunting, because her company gave her one week to move to Kansas City." – Alum (In-person)

"The comradery - to be in a space where I was with a couple of hundred people who were my people, who cared about what I cared about and wanted to do what I wanted to do was huge, just in reminding me that I wasn't alone, and that the opportunities were out there." – Alum (In-person)

"[Career Connections] is a place where you have people in your same shoes. They all share the same, similar goals and they're all looking for future careers in different ways. This is like a network of comrades or network of friends, and they can help each other." – Alum (Virtual)

Some of these friendships expanded into a more professional dimension as well, with alumni collaborating on shared projects coming out of Career Connections.

"I met a girl [at Career Connections] and we got along really well, and we decided to do a project together. So Career Connections had a grant kind of associated to it, you could apply for a project, her and I decided to do this series about people who make food and the cultural stories associated with their food. And she had an NGO in Denver so we were going to do some video series." – Alum (In-person)

"The main benefits that I got from the Career Connections were getting connections, networking with individuals. I volunteer with an anti-human trafficking organization and I was supporting it as a program director, so I was helping making some curriculum for them. And we have some documents that were written in French and [a friend from Career Connections] actually did the work for us. She helped us translate some of those documents. It was great collaborating and networking with individuals." – Alum (In-person)

Similarly, alumni developed relationships with presenters that provided them with informal and formal professional and mentorship opportunities to better prepare them for career next steps, like interviewing for a new position or applying to graduate school.

"Just to be able to talk to people and say, 'Listen, yes I'm a graduate of this program and I've spent all these years abroad, I've traveled to all parts of the world. What do you think might be my prospects at an organization?' Or 'How do you view me?' Or 'How do you view somebody like me with an academic background?' And 'If you were to interview somebody like me, what is it that you would like to hear?' Those are the kinds of things, which for me would be a value because I simply don't know." – Alum (Virtual)

"I met a professor from Georgetown University. And at the time I was applying for my masters in business and international relations. From Career Connections, I was able to develop a relationship with this professor who was just guiding me through that process. The relationship that I have with her in terms of furthering my career and education, helped me a lot. And I got that from the Career Connections. It wouldn't have happened if I didn't meet her through Career Connections." – Alum (Virtual)

Although alumni forged connections with fellow alumni and presenters alike during the seminar experience, they struggled to maintain and capitalize on connections after Career Connections ended. Many alumni wanted the opportunity for more networking opportunities, either virtual or in-person. Suggestions for ways to maintain and expand on these connections emerged in several ways. Alumni felt that having multi-session seminars with the same individuals would allow for deeper, more sustained relationships rather than a one-time meeting at a single seminar event. Reunions for specific seminars, or for participants who live in the same geographic area, would achieve the same goal in allowing relationships to continue growing and developing after the seminar ends.

"Yeah. I did connect with them and stuff on LinkedIn, but there was not much after that. For students, I guess I connected with a few students. One actually I have a connection on Instagram as well, but yeah, it basically ended when the session did." – Alum (In-person)

Alumni also voiced the desire for opportunities to leverage the relationships formed in a more formal and explicitly professional development setting (like a job fair, or mentorship relationship). ECA-structured and promoted events that provide opportunities for alumni and presenters to connect on potential job openings and interest in mentoring or coaching relationships would help alumni to leverage these relationships in a way that directly supports their next career step.

For many, the lack of emphasis on formal (and informal) networking time is a weakness of Career Connections programming and they wanted more time built-in to cultivate the relationships formed.

"Just having the opportunity to be around other people who had completed foreign exchanges was helpful. Also I met a couple of diplomats, for example. And none of these personal connections have resulted in anything yet for me, I haven't cultivated them." – Alum (In-person)

"Just simply having a Career Connections and just having people talk is good, but let's really connect. That's the part that's missing. I hear the career part and we have this and we have that, and we have that, but we don't have the actual connection part, the culture of collaboration part." - Alum (Virtual)

Some alumni felt that to really build on the relationships formed at Career Connections, there should be recurring sessions with the same group of people, or planned reunions for certain seminars to come back together and continue building the relationship.

"Connecting us to other presenters or connecting us to other students and other participants...it's been difficult. I understand that everyone's on their own schedule, but I don't recall a moment where they're like, "Hey, let's do a reunion of Austin or do a reunion of New York." It's more like the idea, in the moment we had to make our contacts and especially through LinkedIn. And then after that, that it felt like that was it." – Alum (In-person)

"I think the way I envision it and without getting too detailed, is that when you having events, they're great and people make a lot of great connections, but are we ensuring that those connections can be sustained even outside of our Career Connections format? And one way to do that, if there was a working group or a series of working groups that were formed, this is your cohort. This is your team for the next six weeks. We're going to do a workshop on giving and receiving feedback. You're going to share with one another. And then you're going to be able to support one another over the next six weeks outside of this

space. And we'll help create shared accountability checkpoints to where you're touching base with one another to continue to share your lessons learned as you apply this training or as you apply these tools. And it's a way to keep people engaged even outside of the actual Career Connections event." – Presenter (In-person)

"Something that I would be looking for is maybe like a multisession, something where you would see the same people, because I think that is how you form those stronger connections and maintain them is that you just repeatedly see the same people. Right now, the session is really good and then we kind of leave the session and it's like, "Oh, okay, now it's over." – Alum (Virtual)

In addition to continuing to foster the relationships built, alumni expressed a desire for guidance and structure around leveraging those relationships for future opportunities. For this, they proposed more explicit career fair or job-focused networking, where alumni and presenters can connect in the name of finding a new position.

"With Career Connections, it could be more, just more of a network. For these who are interested in hiring Americans or anything like that to kind of have more of an in. Because that is, it is more of a process to hire someone who's not a, not a citizen." – Alum (Virtual)

They also felt the relationships they formed at Career Connections could be leveraged for continued formal career coaching and mentoring purposes. The more informal connections built at Career Connections could transform into an ongoing source of support, guidance, and accountability.

"If they could offer some sort of Career Coaching, even if we were like a group of us that kind of like, "Hey, let's check in, have you updated your resume? Have you shared it with somebody?" Have somebody hold you accountable to, we watched, we learned about transferable skills and how to write them in the resume or whatever it might be, and now have you gone back to your resume or have you gone back to that cover letter? It could be a group, it could be a peer within whoever participated in that particular session, but just say, "Okay, you guys are going to be paired up and hold each other accountable to X, Y, and Z." – Alum (Virtual)

"Create a cross-agency (cross-program) mentorship program between alumni. Networking between programs to create a more cohesive environment and cohesive identity. People who participate in exchange programs are people that want to give back. Having an alumni-to-alumni mentorship program could build that base and build a stronger cohesive identity. Should be cross-cutting; not just older alumni with more

recent participants. Would be best to segment by desired topics or advice that people are seeking. Looking to switch careers? Looking for guidance mid-career? Topic-based." – Alum (Virtual)

"Because I think people really need these kinds of mentorships. That's the difference between sticking with a career path or skipping five years of wandering around not sharing where you're going to go. If you get some good advice, it can really help steer. So, basically just the weekend is inspiring and it's great advice, but if you can follow it up with something that's concrete, it's what do I specifically do next?" - Presenter (In-person)

CONCLUSIONS

Participants valued Career Connections. Participants felt that Career Connections offers valuable professional development information and the ability to connect with like-minded individuals on professional goals and personal interests.

Career Connections is a credible resource for professional development programming. Alumni believed that the presenters at Career Connections are experienced, helpful, and that they provide reliable information for career development actions and decisions.

Career Connections is meeting the needs of early career and government track professionals better than those of other audiences. A majority of interviewees believed that Career Connections seminar content is focused on the needs of entry level or early-career alumni that are typically interested in a career in the public sector, particularly in the Department of State. As a result, most interviewees felt that Career Connections was not meeting the unique needs of more experienced alumni or alumni looking to transition between sectors.

Career Connections has practical applications that alumni have leveraged in support of their careers. Participants shared that they made and maintained valuable connections with one another. Alumni-presenter connections most often take the form of a mentorship relationship. Alumni-to-alumni connections create important professional networks that have even led to joint project efforts. Several alumni interviewees also utilized information and advice from sessions to advance their careers. Some reported deciding to pursue a long-desired career path due to Career Connections, while others chose to change their career trajectory after learning about new opportunities through Career Connections.

Participant engagement and interactivity is a strength of career connections programming. Alumni and presenters greatly valued interactive sessions and opportunities to network with

other participants. In general, in-person seminars were preferred to virtual sessions because of the increased ability to connect with others in face-to-face settings.

Both virtual and in-person platforms offer value, in different ways, to career connections programming. In-person programming offers space for organic connections and relationship building but can be restrictive for those without the time or financial means to attend. Virtual programming is accessible to a wider socio-economic and geographic audience but has high attendance attrition rates and does not allow for high levels of engagement, either between alumni and presenters or alumni-to-alumni.

Lack of clarity around audience and goals muddles Career Connections communications for participants. Interviewees were confused about the overall goals of Career Connections and its intended audience. While generally understood as a professional development opportunity, confusion around goals and audience made some alumni question attending.

Participants would benefit from clear, consistent communication from Career Connections. Alumni and presenters appreciate communications using consistent platforms with messaging that clearly relays the goals and intending audience of Career Connections seminars.

One-off activities limit the potential impact of Career Connections. Alumni and presenters feel that follow-up events or touch points could increase the value of the content shared at Career Connections and keep content top of mind for alumni.

Participants would like opportunities to stay engaged with Career Connections programming after the event. Interviewees appreciated opportunities to provide feedback on their experiences with Career Connections. Additionally, many expressed a desire to attend other Career Connections events and/or be provided a platform through which they could continue to engage with other participants.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Relatively small adjustments to the goals, programming, communications, and engagement would serve to help participants achieve even more successful outcomes from the Career Connections seminars.

INTENTIONS AND GOALS

The Career Connections team should align the goals and the intended audience of the programming in the design phase.

- Once there is alignment and clarity around the intention behind the Career Connections programming and who it is meant to serve, this should be made clear in any communications surrounding the event, both to alumni and presenters. This will allow for presenters to come prepared to meet the needs of their audience, and for alumni to opt into programs that will be useful to them and skip the ones that will not be.
- A special effort should be made to target specific Career Connections programming to sub-audiences who need more attention and support, such as those transitioning between sectors mid-career, or those who are fresh out of their exchange.

PROGRAMMING

The current Career Connections programming is highly valued by alumni and should continue to support exchange alumni with professional development and networking opportunities to better reflect on and advance their careers by focusing on programming that is highly interactive and that will be immediately applicable and actionable to alumni, such as:

- Networking opportunities that can lead to friendships, professional collaborations, and mentoring outcomes across cohort type (i.e. a mix of exchange program type, age groups etc.)
- Workshops on topics like grant application writing, resume writing, navigating LinkedIn and USAJobs and how to best leverage exchange experience in the job market
- Workshops that cater to the needs of diverse target audiences with differing experience-levels and career paths
- Long-term programming that builds on knowledge across sessions in addition to one-time information-sharing and/or networking sessions

Furthermore, the Career Connections team should consider sending a pre-program survey to participants asking about their professional background (such as employment sector, years of experience, etc.). The results should be shared with presenters and used to direct programming.

COMMUNICATIONS

The Career Connections team should develop a strategic communications plan, that includes the following elements:

- Consistent cadence of outreach and events – best practices indicate this is year-round engagement, focusing on once a quarter.
- Consistent outreach platform – primarily via email with supplemental contact through platforms like LinkedIn and Facebook groups.
- Incorporates past participant voices to communicate about and promote Career Connections programming – word of mouth advertising from satisfied and engaged alumni will help increase engagement.

MODELS: VIRTUAL, IN-PERSON, AND HYBRID

The current program successfully utilized both virtual and in-person programming. Both models have strengths and weaknesses. Career Connections should continue to use in-person and virtual models where each best serves the content and consider how the two models could be joined in a hybrid model.

- The in-person model should be used for programming focused on prolonged engagement, networking, interactivity, and giving or providing feedback (like a resume workshop, or cocktail hour).
- The virtual model should be used for programming focused on information delivery, accessibility, and specificity (like a seminar on a niche topic like technology jobs in Southeast Asia).
- The hybrid model should be used for longitudinal learning and continued engagement (like a multisession program on writing cover letters or grant applications).

CONTINUED ENGAGEMENT

Participants report that Career Connections provides highly valuable networking and other professional development opportunities. Because of this, one of their most frequent requests was to provide opportunities for continued engagement with ECA, and other participants (presenters and alumni) in between seminars.

- Career Connections should utilize a variety of platforms for continued participant engagement (between alumni and presenters) after Career Connections events. This could be achieved with Facebook, WhatsApp, or LinkedIn Learning groups, and the alumni portal, as well as through the organization of happy hours and other in-person networking events based on geographic proximity and/or specific areas of interest.
- Career Connections should allow for passionate alumni to continue to be involved as presenters, encouraging them to think about what they might be able to offer to other alumni (especially more senior alumni).
- Career Connections should continue to gather feedback from participants and allow for their voice to be heard. This should include conducting a post-program survey which (among other things) solicits feedback on presenters' sessions.
- The Career Connections team should use continued engagement with program alumni as an opportunity to update their contact information, through either ongoing survey efforts or future program records.

ANNEX I: EVALUATION STATEMENT OF WORK

TASK ORDER FOR KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEW SUPPORT FOR THE CAREER CONNECTIONS PROGRAM EVALUATION

1. BACKGROUND

The Career Connections program is managed by the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) Office of Alumni Affairs (OAA). Started in 2019, 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 invaluable networking opportunities for U.S. alumni with leaders in their communities with activities including: 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.

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

The evaluation will answer the following questions:

1. Based on participant perspectives, is the Career Connections program following the right approach to providing professional development opportunities to American alumni? (i.e. is the right content being delivered, do participants have any recommendations for different delivery mechanisms for the topics being taught, are the speakers and career experts invited to the workshops effective, etc.)
2. What are the *immediate* outcomes of Career Connections workshops?

2. SCOPE

This task order is for assistance conducting a literature review and about 60 key informant interviews (KIIs).¹

Literature Review: The Offeror will undertake a literature review of existing research on best practices in professional development training.

Key Informant Interviews: KIIs are expected to be conducted with the following two groups:

- **Alumni:** The Offeror will conduct KIIs with a sample of alumni (there have been 625 participants since 2019) that have participated in Career Connections seminars, totaling approximately 45 interviews.
- **Workshop Presenter:** The Offeror will conduct KIIs with experts (there have been about 100 presenters) who have participated in the seminars as presenters to understand their opinions on what they saw that could be strengthened and gather recommendations on best practices based on their experience with professional development trainings. This group should total approximately 15 interviews.
- **Professional Development Leaders/Researchers:** There is a rich base of literature around professional development programs for young professionals. Interviews with their authors and/or with private sector/interagency leadership that organize similar programs and networking events would be very valuable for this evaluation. This group should total no more than nine interviews.

It is expected that all KIIs will be conducted remotely (via videoconference or phone) and in English. Qualitative data collection will be conducted simultaneously with the ECA-directed survey.

Selection: ECA will provide contact lists for all seminars, and the Offeror may make their own determination for how best to select KII participants (with approval from the ECA Evaluation Division). However, for both groups, selection should ensure equal distribution across the following:

- Various Career Connections Seminars²
- Demographics (home state, gender, age, etc.)

NOTE: This evaluation deals exclusively with American participants and thus requires OMB PRA clearance. The Evaluation Division expects to obtain that clearance by the end of May 2021. The Offeror will not be expected to develop KII guides, as those were previously developed for OMB PRA clearance. Those guides will be provided upon start of the task order.

3. TASKS AND DELIVERABLES

The Offeror will produce the following deliverables:

1. **Weekly Check-Ins:** Every week, the contractor should plan to speak with the Evaluation Division project team on progress and any challenges or outstanding issues that need to be taken care of. These discussions should last no more than 30 minutes.
2. **Literature Review Summary:** The contractor will provide a summary of the best practices research, not to exceed five (5) pages. This will be included as an appendix to the final report, and referenced as appropriate to support report conclusions and recommendations.

3. **Report Draft:** Once all KIIs are completed, the contractor will provide a summary of initial findings. This will be used by the Evaluation Division to form the basis of their final report to the Office of Alumni Affairs. The contractor should also allow time to review the joint report prior to submission to the Office of Alumni Affairs.
4. **Final Presentation:** While the Evaluation Division will take the lead on preparing and presenting a final presentation, the Offeror should plan to attend the final presentation to provide context from interviews and answer questions.

4. **PERIOD OF PERFORMANCE**

The period of performance will run from the date this task order is signed through October 31, 2021. We would like KIIs to be completed by the end of July 2021, with the report draft completed by mid-September and the final briefing to take place in October.

5. **PERSONNEL**

The contractor should propose a team with a combination of qualifications as outlined in this SOW to provide the best possible product. Requested skills of key and non-key personnel are outlined below. ECA expects the team to consist of one team leader/primary evaluator that has relevant expertise in qualitative research.

Key Personnel

Key personnel will include: *Qualitative Data Specialist*

This person should be a mid or senior-level facilitator who has previous experience leading qualitative data collection, demonstrates strong analytical skills, and is comfortable analyzing and presenting qualitative data. The team leader should be available during standard U.S. work hours. The team leader will be expected to be available for the entire period of performance. **The Evaluation Division must approve any key personnel change in writing.**

Non-Key Personnel

If necessary, non-key personnel can include a mid- or junior-level person familiar with and have experience with qualitative data collection and analysis, and demonstrate strong analytical skills. This person can should have experience working with large qualitative data sets, and be familiar with and have experience with qualitative data collection and analysis, and demonstrate strong analytical skills.

6. **PAYMENT**

Payment will be remitted to the contractor upon its successful delivery of deliverables.

Annex II: Data Collection Instruments

ALUMNI SURVEY

The Evaluation Division in the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA), in coordination with the Office of Alumni Affairs, is currently undertaking an evaluation of the Career Connections program. The purpose of this evaluation is to improve the professional development programming for U.S. citizen alumni of government sponsored exchange programs. This is an opportunity for you to share your experiences and let ECA know what you are looking for from professional development opportunities.

The survey contains 36 questions and should take 20 minutes (average) to complete. You do not have to have participated in a Career Connections seminar to take this survey.

Please note that your participation in this survey is voluntary, and you are free to end the survey at any time. By clicking the “Consent and enter survey” button below, you are consenting to the following terms:

- Your participation in this evaluation is voluntary. We do not anticipate that participating in this evaluation will result in any risks or direct benefit to you. However, your inputs may lead to recommendations that benefit the Career Connections Program—and, thereby, the general public. You may skip any questions you are not comfortable answering.
- The information that you provide in the survey will be used to write a report. This report will be shared with the U.S. Department of State and other stakeholders for comment and will eventually be made public. Any responses you provide may be reported in the final report as part of the anonymized aggregated quantitative analysis or the qualitative analysis from open-ended responses, with all personal identifying information removed.
- The U.S. government will take reasonable measures to protect privacy data, personally identifiable information, and other sensitive data obtained from the survey. Responses to questions may be reported by demographic category (i.e., field of study, employment status), country, or cohort year. The only identifying information used will be the demographic information collected in the beginning of the survey.
- As this evaluation requires us to speak with a broad range of program alumni, we may ask you to share contact information for the connections that you mention, in the cases where we do not already have updated or valid contact information for these parties. As with all other questions, you may skip or decline to answer any questions you are not comfortable answering. Updated contact information may be shared with the U.S. Department of State upon completion of this survey.

- The data you provide may be reanalyzed at a later date for a follow-up study or other purpose approved by the U.S. Department of State. The data may be made available to third parties as required by law.
- You may withdraw your consent at any time by contacting ECAEvaluation@state.gov.

We ask that you complete this survey by [DEADLINE].

If you have any questions about the survey, please contact Mary Ann Aabye at AabyeMA@state.gov. If you have any questions about the Career Connections program, please contact Paul Garr at GarrPS@state.gov.

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE

By clicking the button to begin the survey below, you are giving your consent to participate in this evaluation. If you do not wish to participate, please click the exit survey link below.

- Consent and enter survey
- Decline and end survey now

1. Home State: [drop-down list]
2. Age: [drop-down list]
3. Which program are you an alumni off? [drop-down list of ECA programs]
 - American Arts Incubator Program
 - American Council of Young Political Leaders
 - American Film Showcase
 - American Music Abroad
 - Arts Envoy
 - Benjamin Franklin Summer Institutes
 - Benjamin A. Gilman International Scholarship Program
 - Congress-Bundestag Vocational Youth Exchange
 - Congress-Bundestag Youth Exchange
 - Congress-Bundestag Youth Exchange For Young Professionals
 - Critical Language Enhancement Award
 - Critical Language Scholarship Program
 - English Language Fellow Program
 - English Language Specialist Program
 - Fulbright Public Policy Fellowship
 - Fulbright Distinguished Awards in Teaching Program
 - Fulbright Distinguished Chairs Program
 - Fulbright English Teaching Assistant Program

Fulbright-Fogarty Fellowships in Public Health
Fulbright International Education Administrators Program
Fulbright-mtvU Fellowship
Fulbright National Geographic Digital Storytelling Fellowship
Fulbright Schuman Program
Fulbright Specialist Program
Fulbright Teachers for Global Classrooms
Fulbright Travel-Only Grants
Fulbright U.S. Scholar Program
Fulbright U.S. Student Program
German-American Partnership Program
International Sports Programming Initiative
Kennedy-Lugar Exchange and Study (YES) Abroad
National Security Language Initiative for Youth
Next Level
Peace Corps
Sports Envoy Program
Venice Art Biennale
Venice Architectural Biennale
Youth Ambassadors
Youth Leadership Program

4. Please check the option that best describes your gender:
 - a. Male
 - b. Female
 - c. Non-binary
 - d. I do not wish to respond
5. Have you participated in a Career Connections seminar?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No [**skip to Q31**]
6. Did you attend an **in-person** Career Connection seminar?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
7. [**If “yes” selected in Q6**] Which Career Connections seminar did you attend? *Please select all that apply.*
 - a. Raleigh, NC (February 2019)
 - b. Denver, CO (April 2019)

- c. Los Angeles, CA (July 2019)
 - d. New York, NY (October 2019)
 - e. Austin, TX (January 2020)
8. Have you attended or viewed any of the **virtual** Career Connection seminars?
- a. Yes
 - b. No
9. [If “yes” selected in Q6 AND in Q8] How would you compare your in-person and virtual Career Connections experiences?
- a. My in-person experience was better
 - b. My virtual experience was better
 - c. My experiences were the about the same
10. How did you hear about the Career Connections seminar?
- a. Was mentioned in my ECA program
 - b. Another alumni told me about the Career Connections program
 - c. Was mentioned at an official event I attended (at an Embassy overseas, speech by a State Department official, etc.)
 - d. LinkedIn
 - e. Twitter
 - f. Facebook
 - g. Email
 - h. Website
 - i. Other: [write-in]
11. What was your professional status when you participated in Career Connections?
- a. Employed
 - b. Seeking Employment
 - c. Studying
 - d. Both working and Studying
 - e. Other: [write-in]
12. Since participating in Career Connections (*select all that apply*):
- a. I have remained in the same job
 - b. I have found new employment
 - c. I have continued in the same university program (BA, MA, PhD, etc.)
 - d. I have started a new university program (BA, MA, PhD, etc.)
 - e. Other: [write-in]

13. [If Q12.a or b selected] In which sector is your job?
- a. For-profit
 - b. Non-profit
 - c. Government
 - d. University
 - e. Other: [write-in]
14. How have you been able to use your Career Connections seminar? *Select all that apply.*
- a. I have not been able to use my Career Connections experience
 - b. In searching and applying for a new job
 - c. In searching and applying for an internship or fellowship
 - d. In applying for graduate school
 - e. Networking
 - f. Finding a mentor
 - g. Other: [write-in]
15. [If Q14.a selected] Why have you not been able to use your Career Connections seminar?
[skip to Q24]
16. Have you utilized these components of your Career Connections seminar?

	Yes	No
Resume-Building		
Developing a Personal Brand		
Job Search Skills		
Pathways to Careers in the U.S. Government		
Networking		
Developing an Online Presence		
Job Interviewing		

17. [If “no” selected in Q16] Why have you not been able to utilize information from the **Resume-Building** session? *Select all that apply.*
- a. Session was not part of my Career Connections seminar
 - b. Session did not provide useful information
 - c. The speaker/expert was not engaging
 - d. I have been too busy
 - e. I am not currently job searching
 - f. I have not had the opportunity to put it to use yet
 - g. Other: [write-in]

18. [If “no” selected in Q16] Why have you not been able to utilize information from the **Developing a Personal Brand** session? *Select all that apply.*
- a. Session was not part of my Career Connections seminar
 - b. Session did not provide useful information
 - c. The speaker/expert was not engaging
 - d. I have been too busy
 - e. I am not currently job searching
 - f. I have not had the opportunity to put it to use yet
 - g. Other: [write-in]
19. [If “no” selected in Q16] Why have you not been able to utilize information from the **Job Search Skills** session? *Select all that apply.*
- a. Session was not part of my Career Connections seminar
 - b. Session did not provide useful information
 - c. The speaker/expert was not engaging
 - d. I have been too busy
 - e. I am not currently job searching
 - f. I have not had the opportunity to put it to use yet
 - g. Other: [write-in]
20. [If “no” selected in Q15] Why have you not been able to utilize information from the **Pathways to Careers in the U.S. government** session? *Select all that apply.*
- a. Session was not part of my Career Connections seminar
 - b. Session did not provide useful information
 - c. The speaker/expert was not engaging
 - d. I have been too busy
 - e. I am not currently job searching
 - f. I have not had the opportunity to put it to use yet
 - g. Other: [write-in]
21. [If “no” selected in Q16] Why have you not been able to utilize information from the **Networking** sessions? *Select all that apply.*
- a. Session was not part of my Career Connections seminar
 - b. Session did not provide useful information
 - c. The speaker/expert was not engaging
 - d. I have been too busy
 - e. I am not currently job searching
 - f. I have not had the opportunity to put it to use yet
 - g. Other: [write-in]

22. [If “no” selected in Q16] Why have you not been able to utilize information from the **Developing an Online Presence** sessions? *Select all that apply.*
- a. Session was not part of my Career Connections seminar
 - b. Session did not provide useful information
 - c. The speaker/expert was not engaging
 - d. I have been too busy
 - e. I am not currently job searching
 - f. I have not had the opportunity to put it to use yet
 - g. Other: [write-in]
23. [If “no” selected in Q16] Why have you not been able to utilize information from the **Job Interviewing** session? *Select all that apply.*
- a. Session was not part of my Career Connections seminar
 - b. Session did not provide useful information
 - c. The speaker/expert was not engaging
 - d. I have been too busy
 - e. I am not currently job searching
 - f. I have not had the opportunity to put it to use yet
 - g. Other: [write-in]
24. What other kinds of professional development activities have you participated in? *Select all that apply.*
- a. Training provided by my employer
 - b. Workshops provided by my university
 - c. Trainings I have taken on my own (e.g. independent of work or school)
 - d. Other: [write-in]
 - e. I have not participated in any other professional development
25. Based on what you have been able to utilize from these other experiences, how does the Career Connections seminar compare?
- a. Much more useful
 - b. Slightly more useful
 - c. About the same
 - d. Slightly less useful
 - e. Much less useful
26. What changes would you make to the Career Connections seminar? *Select all that apply.*
- a. Make each seminar longer (*currently, each seminar is 2 days*)
 - b. Offer a wider variety of topics at each seminar
 - c. Focus more on interactive workshops

- d. Provide more time for networking
 - e. Provide more time for resume assistance
 - f. Provide more time for one-on-one/mentorship opportunities at the seminar
 - g. None
 - h. Other: [write-in]
27. What other session topics should be considered for the Career Connections program?
28. Overall, how satisfied were you with your Career Connections experience?
- a. Extremely satisfied
 - b. Moderately satisfied
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Moderately dissatisfied
 - e. Extremely dissatisfied
29. Would you recommend Career Connections to other alumni?
- a. Yes [Survey Ends]
 - b. No
30. Why would you not recommend Career Connections? [Survey Ends]
31. Why have you not participated in a Career Connections seminar? *Select all that apply.*
- a. I have never heard of Career Connections
 - b. Seminars were not held in cities near me
 - c. I was not interested in the sessions offered because I am not job hunting
 - d. I was not interested in the sessions offered because they did not look interesting to me
 - e. The experts conducting the seminars aren't great
 - f. Other: [write-in]
32. [If Q31.a selected] [show *brief* info page on Career Connections program] Based on this information, would you be interested in participating in a future Career Connections seminar?
- a. Yes
 - b. No
33. [If Q31.a selected] In which of the following ways are you in contact with the Office of Alumni Affairs? *Select all that apply.*
- a. LinkedIn
 - b. Twitter

- c. Facebook
- d. Instagram
- e. Email
- f. International Exchange Alumni Website (alumni.state.gov)
- g. Through Partners of the Americas
- h. Through another program office at ECA: [write-in]
- i. Other: [write-in]
- j. None of the above

34. [If Q31.a selected] How would you like to hear about opportunities like Career Connections? *Select all that apply.*

- a. LinkedIn
- b. Twitter
- c. Facebook
- d. Instagram
- e. Email
- f. International Exchange Alumni Website (alumni.state.gov)
- g. Through Partners of the Americas
- h. Through another program office at ECA: [write-in]
- i. Other: [write-in]

35. What kinds of professional development seminars would you be interested in attending?
[Survey Ends]

DISCUSSION GUIDE: ALUMNI INTERVIEWS

Thank you for taking time to speak with me today. My name is _____, and I am a researcher on the Career Connections Program evaluation.

The Evaluation Division in the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA), in coordination with the Office of Alumni Affairs, is currently undertaking an evaluation of the Career Connections program. The purpose of this evaluation is to improve the professional development programming for U.S. citizen alumni of government sponsored exchange programs. This is an opportunity for you to share your experiences and let ECA know what you are looking for from professional development opportunities.

A few notes before we begin:

- This interview should take 30 minutes from start to finish.
- Please note that your participation in this interview is voluntary, and you are free to end our conversation at any time. I'm going to run through some information below, and at the end I'd like to just get verbal consent from you that you understand and agree to the following terms:
 - Your participation in this evaluation is voluntary. We do not anticipate that participating in this evaluation will result in any risks or direct benefit to you. However, your inputs may lead to recommendations that benefit the Career Connections Program—and, thereby, the general public. You may skip any questions you are not comfortable answering.
 - The information that you provide in this interview will be used to write a report. This report will be shared with the U.S. Department of State and other stakeholders for comment and will eventually be made public. Any responses you provide may be reported in the final report as part of the anonymized aggregated quantitative analysis or the qualitative analysis from open-ended responses, with all personal identifying information removed.
 - The U.S. government will take reasonable measures to protect privacy data, personally identifiable information, and other sensitive data obtained from this interview. Responses to questions may be reported by demographic category (i.e., role, or field of study).
 - The data you provide may be reanalyzed at a later date for a follow-up study or other purpose approved by the U.S. Department of State. The data may be made available to third parties as required by law.
 - You may withdraw your consent at any time by contacting ECAEvaluation@state.gov.

Do you have any questions about this survey or the Career Connection Program evaluation more broadly? *[If the respondent asks questions, answer them.]*

If you have any questions about the interview, please contact Mary Ann Aabye at AabyeMA@state.gov. If you have any questions about the Career Connections program, please contact Paul Garr at GarrPS@state.gov.

Do you consent to participate in this evaluation? *[If the respondent says yes, record their consent and proceed with question 1 (or consent to record – see below). If the respondent says no, thank the respondent and end the interview.]*

With your permission, we would also like to record the interview for reference purposes. Do you consent to be recorded? *[If the respondent says yes, record their consent and proceed with question 1. If the respondent/any respondent says no, do not record the interview.]*

Warm-up and Introduction (approx. 5 minutes)

- First of all, which Career Connections seminar did you participate in?
- What have you been up to since you completed the program? *(probe for: current job, academic program, internship/fellowship, etc.)*

Experience with the Career Connections Seminar (approx. 20 minutes)

Now I want to ask you a few questions about your experience with the Career Connections seminar you attended:

- Would you say it was a positive experience or negative experience for you overall? Why?
- What did you learn about while you were there? *(probe for: cover letter and resume writing, networking, job search skills, U.S. Government career paths, etc.)*
- What was the best part of your Career Connections experience? *(probe for: most useful session (why?), connections made, skills learned, etc.)*
- What was the worst part, or the most difficult part, of your Career Connections experience? *(probe for: issues with registration, session topics, session length/type etc.)*
- Do you think there was a good mix of sessions? *(probe for: panel sessions, interactive workshops, etc.)*
 - Were there topics you wish you had been able to cover?
 - Anything you wished there was less of during the seminar?

Impact of Career Connections Seminar (approx. 20 minutes)

- Did participating in the Career Connections seminar have an impact on your career or academic goals? If so, how?
- What skills did you gain during the seminar that you've been able to apply? *(probe for: cover letter and resume writing, networking, job search skills, U.S. Government career paths, etc.)*
 - Can you provide specific examples of how you have been able to apply these skills?

- Are there skills that would have been useful that you did not learn as part of the program?
 - If not, why not?
- Beyond just the skills you learned, did you experience any personal growth as a result of your Career Connections experience? Can you describe that change? (*probe: growth in self-confidence or inter-personal skills*)
- Are there any follow-up activities or resources you would like to see? (*probe for: session materials, presenter contacts, etc.*)
- Would you recommend Career Connections to others? If so, how would you describe it to them?

Wrap-up (approx. 1 minute)

Is there anything I missed that you would like to tell me about, either positive or negative? Any other final comments?

[For snowball sampling] Is there anyone else we should speak to about their experiences with Career Connections?

Thank you so much for your participation!

DISCUSSION GUIDE: PRESENTER INTERVIEWS

Thank you for taking time to speak with me today. My name is _____, and I am evaluating the Career Connections Program.

The Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) is currently undertaking an evaluation of the Career Connections program to improve the professional development programming for exchange alumni. This is an opportunity for you to share your experiences as a presenter.

- This interview should take 30 minutes.
- You may skip any questions you are not comfortable answering.
- The information that you provide in this interview will be used to write a report. While this report will be shared with the U.S. Department of State and eventually be made public, any responses you provide will be anonymous.

[If the respondent asks questions about the evaluation: If you have any questions about the interview, please contact Mary Ann Aabye at AabyeMA@state.gov. If you have any questions about the Career Connections program, please contact Paul Garr at GarrPS@state.gov. Public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 45 minutes per response, including time required for searching existing data sources, gathering the necessary documentation, providing the information and/or documents required, and reviewing the final collection. If you have comments on the accuracy of this burden estimate and/or recommendations for reducing it, please send them to: ecaevaluation@state.gov]

Do you consent to participate in this evaluation? *[If the respondent says yes, record their consent and proceed with question 1 (or consent to record – see below). If the respondent says no, thank the respondent and end the interview.]*

With your permission, we would also like to record the interview for reference purposes. Do you consent to be recorded? *[If the respondent says yes, record their consent and proceed with question 1. If the respondent/any respondent says no, do not record the interview.]*

Warm-up and Introduction (approx. 5 minutes)

- Our records show that you presented at _____ and it was [virtual/in person]. Can you confirm this? (If unclear: What do you hope participants learned?)

Experience with the Career Connections Seminar (approx. 25 minutes)

- What would you say was the purpose of the gathering overall?
 - What was your impression of the attendees?
- Was your experience presenting positive or negative, and why? (Listen for: the most valuable part, if it was formal or informal networking time)

- What prompted you to participate in this event/these events? (*probe for: personal and professional benefits. Recruiting opportunity or educational? Listen for: Had you worked with DOS/ECA before?*)
 - How did you select/propose your presentation topic?
- What do you think was done well at the Career Connection seminar you presented on? (Can you give particular examples?)
 - What was the format of your presentation?
 - What was the reception? Did the audience seem engaged? Did they ask good questions?
 - What other session topics should be considered for the Career Connections program? (Reword if they can't say: What skills do you look for when making hiring decisions that you think would be valuable to include in future Career Connections workshops?)
- How do you think ECA can improve the Career Connections for participants? (Please provide specific examples.)
 - Are there any best practices from other conferences or professional development events that you would say Career Connections can learn from?
 - How does this event compare to others that are similar?
 - If virtual presenter: Benefits and drawbacks between virtual and in-person? Which would you recommend they proceed with, post-COVID?
- Are there any follow-up activities or resources you would like to see, either for yourself or for the alumni that participated? (*probe for: presenter contacts, long-term or year round engagement etc.*)

Wrap-up (approx. 1 minute)

Is there anything I missed that you would like to tell me about, either positive or negative? Any other final comments?

Thank you so much for your participation!

DISCUSSION GUIDE: EXPERT INTERVIEWS

Thank you for taking time to speak with me today. My name is _____, and I am evaluating the Career Connections Program. As you likely recall from my email, the program is a series of in-person and virtual professional development seminars for alumni of State Department exchange programs. It offers networking and career advice, presentations from expert speakers and trainers, and skills development workshops.

We've reached out to you because of your expertise in this field. Our goal is to identify best practices in alumni network engagement and professional development that may be relevant at the State Department.

- This interview should take 30 minutes.
- You may skip any questions you are not comfortable answering.
- The information that you provide in this interview will be used to write a report. While this report will be shared with the U.S. Department of State and eventually be made public, any responses you provide will be anonymous.

[If the respondent asks questions about the evaluation: If you have any questions about the interview, please contact Mary Ann Aabye at AabyeMA@state.gov.]

Do you consent to participate in this evaluation? *[If the respondent says yes, record their consent and proceed with question 1 (or consent to record – see below). If the respondent says no, thank the respondent and end the interview.]*

With your permission, we would also like to record the interview for reference purposes. Do you consent to be recorded? *[If the respondent says yes, record their consent and proceed with question 1. If the respondent/any respondent says no, do not record the interview.]*

Warm-up and Introduction (approx. 5 minutes)

- Please tell me a little about yourself and your role/specialty.
- What is the most exciting thing happening right now in the field of professional development or alumni engagement?

Experience with Professional Development/Alumni Engagement Work (approx. 15 minutes)

- What would you say are the biggest accomplishments of [Insert the alumni/professional development organization or “alumni/professional development organizations in general”] over the past two years? *{Probe on pandemic successes given the virtual environment, how they innovated to keep their program relevant}*

- What has made that success possible? *{Listen for short-term adaptations and/or long-term strengths}*
- What are some hurdles or challenges you/they face as a network/program? *{Probe on keeping alumni engaged, outreach, database management, competition, funding for programming, etc.}*
 - What solutions have you implemented to overcome them?
 - **For researchers/academics:** What best practices have you seen implemented as solutions to get around those obstacles?
- How would you like to hear the network or program described by alumni? What qualities are important to you?
 - **For researchers/academics:** In an ideal world, how would participants of a professional development/alumni engagement program describe it? What words would they use? Why are those words so important?
- Are there other programs or organizations that you consider “competitors” for the attention of members of your alumni network or professional development program? If so, tell me what they offer and do well or could potentially do better.
 - **For researchers/academics:** What best practices do the best professional development/alumni networks have in common? What could they do better?
- What is the biggest mistake alumni or professional development programs make?
- What do you think is the “secret sauce” that makes your/an alumni network/professional development program successful? Why do you say that?
 - If you were in charge, what advice would you give the State Department about how to design future programming for their American exchange alumni?

Wrap-up (approx. 1 minute)

Is there anything I missed about your work in the professional development or alumni engagement space that you would like to tell me about? Any other final comments?

Thank you so much for your participation!

ANNEX III: SOURCES OF INFORMATION

WHO WAS REACHED: ALUMNI INTERVIEWS

Total number of alumni interviews conducted after 3+ rounds of outreach: 39

Gender	
Female	26
Male	13
Other	0
TOTAL	39

Career Connections Seminar Participation	
Only in-person	17
Only virtual	19
Both	3

In-Person Session Attended	
Austin, TX (Jan 2020)	6
Los Angeles, CA (July 2019)	6
New York, NY (Oct 2019)	3
Raleigh, NC (Feb 2019)	3
Denver, CO (April 2019)	2
TOTAL	20

Virtual Session Attended	
June 24, 2020: How to Sell Your International Experience	10
July 22, 2020: U.S. Government	8
July 31, 2020: Global+ Discussion: The Network Effect	3
August 21, 2020: Global+ Discussion: Finding a Job in Your Area of Interest	4
August 27, 2020: International Development Panel	4
Sept 23, 2020: Global+ Discussion: Non-Competitive Eligibility	6

Sept 28, 2020: Global+ Discussion: Graduate School	1
Sept 29, 2020: Global+ Discussion: Mentorship	2
Oct 14, 2020: Virtual Networking	1
Oct 20, 2020: Proposal Writing 101	3
Dec 18, 2020: Careers in Foreign Service	7
TOTAL (some interviewees did multiple)	49

Exchange Programs of Alumni Interviewees	
Benjamin A. Gilman International Scholarship Program	4
Mandela Washington Fellowship for Young African Leaders	1
Fulbright	15
Kennedy-Lugar Youth Exchange & Study (YES) Abroad	2
National Security Language Initiative for Youth	2
Critical Language Scholarship Program	5
CBYX	6
English Language Fellow Program	1
English Language Office/Georgetown	1
Sports Envoy Program	1
Youth Ambassadors	1
Young Turkey/ Young America Exchange Fellowship	1
Cultural Exchanges	1
TOTAL (some interviewees did multiple)	41

WHO WAS REACHED: ALUMNI SURVEY

135 Responses (93% complete | 9% incomplete)

Gender	%	Count
Female	69%	93
Male	28%	37
I do not wish to respond	2%	3
Non-binary	1%	1

Response Count = 134

Which program are you an alum of?	%	Count
Fulbright English Teaching Assistant Program	12%	16
Benjamin A. Gilman International Scholarship Program	12%	16
Critical Language Scholarship Program	11%	15
Fulbright U.S. Scholar Program	9%	12
Fulbright U.S. Student Program	9%	12
Congress-Bundestag Youth Exchange	8%	11
Peace Corps	8%	11
National Security Language Initiative for Youth	5%	7
English Language Fellow Program	4%	6
Congress-Bundestag Youth Exchange For Young Professionals	3%	4
Kennedy-Lugar Exchange and Study (YES) Abroad	2%	3
Youth Ambassadors	2%	3
Fulbright International Education Administrators Program	1%	2
Fulbright Teachers for Global Classrooms	1%	2
Fulbright Distinguished Awards in Teaching Program	1%	1

Congress-Bundestag Vocational Youth Exchange	1%	1
Fulbright Specialist Program	1%	1
Sports Envoy Program	1%	1
Other	8%	11

Response Count = 135

Participated in a Career Connections Seminar	%	Count
Yes	80%	108
No	27%	27

Response Count = 135

Attended an In-Person Seminar	%	Count
Yes	51%	52
No	49%	50

Response Count = 102

In-Person Seminar Attended (Select all that apply)	%	Count
Austin, TX (Jan 2020)	33%	17
Los Angeles, CA (July 2019)	25%	13
New York, NY (Oct 2019)	18%	9
Raleigh, NC (Feb 2019)	14%	7
Denver, CO (April 2019)	14%	7

Response Count = 51

Attended or Viewed a Virtual Seminar	%	Count
Yes	64%	68
No	36%	38

Response Count = 106

WHO WAS REACHED: PRESENTERS

Total number of presenter interviews: 15

Gender	
Female	6
Male	9
Other	0
TOTAL	15

Career Connections Seminar Participation (Presenter Interviewees)	
Only in-person	11
Only virtual	4
Both	1

In-Person Session Presented (Presenter Interviewees)	
Austin, TX (Jan 2020)	8
Los Angeles, CA (July 2019)	3
New York, NY (Oct 2019)	0
Raleigh, NC (Feb 2019)	1
Denver, CO (April 2019)	2
TOTAL (1 exclusively virtual)	14

WHO WAS REACHED: EXPERTS

Nine subject matter experts in alumni engagement and/or professional development across a diverse range of industries from academia to the private sector.

Sector	Count
University (Staff)	1
Non-Profit	2
Private	4
Academic	2
TOTAL	9

ANNEX IV: LITERATURE REVIEW

TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

For the purposes of this review, **professional development** refers to continued education and career training, before or after a person has entered the workforce, to help them develop new skills, stay up-to-date on current trends, and advance their career. We define **alumni engagement** as activities that are valued by alumni, strengthen alumni networks and programs, advance the State Department's public diplomacy objectives, and inspire loyalty and support for U.S. policies and programs. Professional development and alumni engagement can take many different forms (i.e., one-time events, seminars, continued series, workshops, online networking forums, etc.). The critical distinction between these often interrelated (and conflated) activities is purpose: professional development offers value-added content aimed at improving a participant's career prospects while alumni engagement aims to focus the attention of alumni on networking and shared values and successes among the broader alumni cohort. Career Connections seminars encompass elements of both fields and therefore this literature review considered relevant writings on both topics.

LIMITATIONS OF THE LITERATURE REVIEW

Despite abundant literature on the topic of professional development, much of it is focused on the field of education (including international education) but lacking in other disciplines, including public diplomacy. Thus, it is important the best practices described here be complemented and validated through primary data collection (in-depth interviews with professional development experts in other fields) in the final research report.

BEST PRACTICES

The literature revealed several best practices for alumni engagement and professional development in both traditional and virtual settings: intention, outreach, interactive sessions and longitudinal learning, networking opportunities, shared experiences, and data collection/follow-up.

Clear intention-setting. Successful alumni engagement networks and professional development events hinge upon clearly defined programmatic goals. Moreover, programmatic activities or events should be organized with the explicit purpose of accomplishing the defined goals. Without clear intent or purpose, these engagement and development opportunities are unlikely to pique initial interest or draw long-term buy-in from targeted participants or members (Ebert, Axelsson, and Harbor, 2015).

Consistent and personalized outreach. A critical aspect of performing effective alumni outreach is establishing and maintaining a comprehensive alumni database with information on contact methods, current job status, and professional engagements. Detailed up-to-date databases allow program and event coordinators to tailor outreach efforts based on alumni interest areas and career progression (Ebert, Axelsson, and Harbor, 2015) which captures more attention and results in higher attendance. This is also an opportunity to strategically target and engage alumni at varying stages of their professional lives, creating a continuum of engagement beginning when they are eager to learn and continuing through when they have sufficient experience to mentor, teach, or hire.

Interactive sessions and longitudinal learning. Successful professional development events coordinate a variety of session formats to engage participants: small- and large-group presentations, panels, and workshops. These provide varying levels of interactivity, lecture, and hands-on practice. Successful event coordinators will identify key professional development skills *and* allow participants to practice those skills and get feedback in real time (Baldwin *et al.*, 2017). Longitudinal programs (continued programming on the same topic over a short or long period of time) can offer adequate time for the *application* of learning, reflection on practice, and promote development of stronger collegial relationships among program participants (Baldwin *et al.*, 2017). This kind of programming could take the form of a series of virtual workshops in which each consecutive session builds on the knowledge of the previous session, or a series of related sessions over the course of a multi-day in-person conference.

Networking opportunities. A critical piece of professional development and, particularly, alumni engagement programs is the opportunity for networking, or relationship-building, among participants. While time to network with the program speakers or leaders is valuable, alumni-to-alumni networking can also be helpful in expanding professional development opportunities for alumni and improving long-term alumni engagement. Moreover, including senior alumni in professional development opportunities creates an iterative process whereby alumni with a wider and deeper range of experiences can enhance junior alumni experience with an event by providing examples (and even potential job opportunities) of real-life career pathways for younger professionals with similar backgrounds and interests. Essentially, connections between distinct alumni cohorts may increase long-term likelihood of alumni engagement (Ebert, Axelsson, and Harbor, 2015).

Positive shared experience and group identity. Alumni engagement efforts are more likely to be successful if alumni feel a shared sense of identity with one another and experience “organizational nostalgia” – positive associations with a program or organization based on two factors: shared *past* experiences and perceived opportunities to improve *future* prospects

(Bardon, Josserand, and Villesèche, 2015). Interactions and networking between junior and senior alumni increase feelings of “organizational nostalgia” for both parties by showing junior alumni the value of their programmatic experiences based on “successful” alumni and providing senior alumni opportunities for mentorship and wisdom-sharing. Featuring specific alumni success stories at events and in marketing communications can generate hope and demonstrate how alumni are valued by the organization. Creating organizational pride also increases the “sense of belonging,” (Hoppler *et al.*, 2020) and boosts the likelihood of alumni staying engaged long-term and/or becoming organic brand ambassadors of the program.

Follow-up and data collection for informed decisions. Reconnecting with participants after both alumni engagement and professional development events is crucial to collect feedback and spark ongoing engagement. Input on event flow, sessions/activities, and speakers is especially important as organizations adapt previously in-person events to a virtual format (Meyer *et al.*, 2021). Using feedback and other sources of data – input from other ECA stakeholders or implementing partners, industry publications, and market research – can help to inform the strategic prioritization of limited resources and make decisions about which less effective programs to sunset. “Information and data management and analytics are becoming critical success factors for alumni associations as they segment programs and become more market-focused,” according to a 2015 memo by the organizational consulting firm, The Napa Group. Additionally, this best practice mirrors a recent recommendation by Hoppler *et al.* to ECA: “Develop performance indicators to track tangible results of investment in alumni programs and organizations,” (2020).

VIRTUAL, IN PERSON, AND HYBRID FORMATS

Many of these best practices have taken on new importance and different forms in the past year, as most in-person alumni engagement and professional development events became virtual due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

BENEFITS OF THE VIRTUAL FORMAT

Inclusivity and access. Virtual engagement offers the ability to boost attendance, both in numbers and diversity, by granting greater opportunities for access to engagement activities. In-person events – often concentrated in a small number of top-tier urban markets – require participants to expend time and financial resources to register for, travel to, and attend event proceedings. This can be especially prohibitive for individuals with additional personal or work responsibilities which restrict them from taking off extensive periods of time for travel, such as parents with young children (Ninar and Wassermann, 2021). The virtual format can increase participation by reducing time and cost burdens on participants, and in fact, may open up attendance to those who wouldn’t consider in-person attendance due to these barriers. Virtual conferences also incur fewer costs for event coordinators who may be able to provide more

content to participants at a lower cost than would be possible at an in-person event (Moore, 2020).

They also introduce the convenience of asynchronous participation in the form of watching a recording of sessions, which eliminates potential time zone barriers and therefore allows for global participation (Meyer *et al.*, 2021). However, asynchronous viewing options should also include recordings of the Q&A portions of each session to enhance the value for participants who were unable to ask follow-up questions of the speakers. Likewise, records of chat streams, virtual conversations, and event-related tweets exist after virtual events are over, allowing for continued engagement after the live event concludes (Gottlieb *et al.*, 2020).

In addition to a larger geographic audience capture, virtual formats with accessibility offerings such as closed-captioning can augment opportunities for non-native English speakers (Meyer *et al.*, 2021) and hard-of-hearing or deaf participants who may not otherwise be able or comfortable to participate.

Long-term and ongoing engagement. As mentioned above, regularly scheduled and interactive sessions are helpful for maintaining long-term engagement. Virtual formats facilitate greater volume and continuity of engagement. For example, “technology-enhanced conferences” and ongoing virtual learning and networking through social media such as Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, and other personal and professional sites can also be helpful for building lasting communities and relationships among and between alumni and organizations or programs (Kowalik, 2011; Tervalo, 2016; Spilker, Prinsen, Kalz, 2020). Social media provides a platform for organizations to share updates with participants and alumni, offer new career or professional development opportunities, convene and foster connections amongst participants and alumni, and build a narrative around organizational values. Kowalik (2011) argues that social media provides the “opportunity to humanize stories of students and alumni of your institution, which can create loyalty and earn future business (students), and ultimately their respect.” Importantly, virtual formats also allow organizations and programs to engage more frequently with participants and alumni and keep organizational or programmatic events top of mind for constituents, while also offering greater control to constituents in *how* they engage. This is particularly important for young social media users. Younger alumni are more likely to participate in engagement efforts if they occur on social media because of the greater control they feel they have over communication and content creation and sharing (Kowalik, 2011).

DRAWBACKS OF THE VIRTUAL FORMAT

Missed informal networking opportunities. A lack of in-person and ad hoc networking opportunities (i.e., mixers, happy hours, and hallway/coffee break chats) limits the type and breadth of connections that participants may form with one another during a virtual event, which may negatively impact the perceived “value” for participants (Ninar and Wassermann, 2021). These opportunities can be simulated in a virtual format by intentional social activities, such as a

virtual treasure hunts (Meyer *et al.*, 2021), virtual happy hours, and creative use of social networking platforms like Slack, WhatsApp, and Twitter to share information and curate discussion. These allow for more intimate, unstructured conversation that might have happened during in-person breaks.

Technological failures. Virtual engagements may experience delays or interruptions due to technological failures either on an event-wide scale or on an individual level. This may be caused by poor internet access, strains on bandwidth due to the large number of participants in an event or large quantities of content being shared, and a lack of appropriate technology (Surkhali and Garbuja, 2020). Additionally, some participants may be unfamiliar with the platforms and technology used for virtual engagements and have difficulty accessing the event.

Virtual engagement fatigue (i.e., “Zoom fatigue”). Virtual engagements have been shown to prompt faster fatigue amongst participants due to the strain involved with maintaining online attentiveness without the in-person interaction. This “cognitive overload” can also prompt higher rates of attrition in attendance, particularly among participants unaccustomed to the virtual environment (Tyler-Smith, 2006). To prevent potential “Zoom fatigue,” event coordinators should plan shorter sessions than in-person equivalents on the same topic and intentionally incorporate more planned breaks in scheduling to allow for a rest from screens (Meyer *et al.*, 2021). Regularly scheduled breaks are also important to reduce distraction levels among participants, many of whom struggle to overcome digital distractions without the accountability of demonstrating in-person attentiveness. It can be helpful to the speaker to have audience members leave their cameras on to better gauge audience engagement. However, this introduces its own challenges in large events or when internet bandwidth prevents smooth connections. Distracted or disruptive participants can be even more detrimental to presentation flow for speakers than not seeing participants at all. Therefore, speakers and presenters alike will benefit from more frequent breaks and shorter sessions (Gottlieb *et al.*, 2020).

Additionally, virtual engagements should prioritize small group sessions with greater opportunity for presenter-participant interaction rather than large-group lectures. Large-group sessions can leave both the speaker and the audience members feeling disconnected from one another as body language and engagement with the topic is difficult to discern through a screen (Gottlieb *et al.*, 2020).

Barriers to social media engagement: Technology may pose privacy, security, and trust concerns for all users, particularly those uncomfortable using virtual platforms (Lauder, 2013). Fostering a robust social media presence also creates an added coordination burden. Before virtual networking and engagement environments can exist, host organizations must have dedicated engagement staff capable of using online tools and platforms (Kowalik, 2011).

Moreover, organizations and programs must be judicious in information-sharing, as alerts and updates that arrive too often may be deemed spam by recipients, thereby prompting them to reduce engagement or disengage altogether. To strike a balance between the benefits and drawbacks of virtual long-term engagement, organizations and programs should plan consistent, but timely, outreach and virtual engagement opportunities to maintain constituent awareness and interest (Tervala, 2016), while also offering in-person events to stimulate social interaction both off- and on-line. Timing of outreach is dependent upon current levels of engagement and the kinds of content or services being offered.

POSSIBILITIES OF HYBRID MODELS

While virtual and virtual/in-person hybrid formats have gained popularity in recent months due to COVID-19 and even in the years prior, the literature still lacks “a coherent perspective on technology-enhanced continuing professional development to help understand and inform the transition towards learning conferences,” (Spilker, Prinsen, Kalz, 2020). Much of the relevant literature is constrained to fields of education and academia. That said, some of the options for hybrid conferences can be adapted to professional development and alumni engagement opportunities.

Meyer *et al.* (2021) make two suggestions for how hybrid professional development conferences could look after COVID-19 to maximize the benefits of both virtual and in-person models while mitigating potential drawbacks. The first model suggests offering in-person and virtual components simultaneously “allowing attendees, who are not able or willing to travel, to partake in in-person sessions and panels through videoconferencing software.” The hybrid format could consist of “regional in-person meetings, to minimize travel, while still being connected to other regional meeting hubs via a shared online program.” The second proposed model separates the educational and networking components of the event altogether. Instead, traditional presentation and poster sessions may be conducted virtually while an asynchronous in-person conference can provide opportunities for working groups and networking (Meyer *et al.*, 2021).

Fraser *et al.* (2017) proposed three similar hybrid possibilities for academic conferences. The first they call “one hub and node,” in which one central conference disseminates information to several smaller locations where participants can meet and discuss conference presentations and proceedings. The second possibility, “multi-hub and nodes,” entails multiple central conference locations as well as smaller nodes, which would allow a higher number of participants to engage in a traditional, conference-like environment. The final approach is “multilateral hub and nodes,” which is nearly identical in structure to the second option but would include multiple time zones, thus potentially allowing for international participation. While all three approaches are meant for simultaneous participation, the third model could include asynchronous viewing of recording conference content.

Several important benefits and drawbacks to hybrid conferences are presented in the literature. In the education literature, Austin *et al.* (2021) describe a hybrid approach similar to Meyer's first model: they hosted an educational session in which a select number of medical students watched a live simulation of a doctor-patient interaction, while two other student groups watched from remote locations. At the end of each session, remote instructors held a debrief with students. Results from a post-debriefing student satisfaction survey found that online simulation observation and debriefing had higher satisfaction than in-person simulation sessions and debriefings.

One study which investigated the test performance of university students in in-person versus virtual settings found that those in online classes performed worse on final exams, suggesting that virtual models may be less effective for long-term knowledge retention (Bachelor, 2019). A similar study in Belgian university classrooms found that students' intrinsic motivation to participate diminishes in hybrid-virtual settings (Raes *et al.*, 2020). While Career Connections does not test participants' retention of the content delivered (and, in fact, many Career Connections sessions do not intend to convey hard skills or testable knowledge), the literature on virtual conferences may have implications on the extent to which alumni retain content after they leave a virtual conference.

Consistent interventions and interactive activities, such as short, impromptu quizzes and regular breakout sessions in which participants can interact with one another, can increase student engagement (Anderson and Anderson, 2010; Knapp, 2018; Raes *et al.*, 2020). Regular interactions also have the potential to reduce attrition rates frequently attributed to online students' feelings of isolation and disengagement (Knapp, 2018). Indeed, Anderson and Anderson (2010) argue that an essential component of a successful virtual professional development (what they call continuing professional education) event is the interactivity. They further posit that event proceedings may occur asynchronously if activities allow participants and facilitators to interact (Anderson and Anderson, 2010), which could have positive implications for the potential future success of hybrid Career Connections conference models.

The incorporation of virtual platforms for interaction (Facebook, LinkedIn, Slack, Twitter) after an event has positive implications for long-term engagement. Several authors mention creating dedicated Slack channels and Twitter hashtags for an event that are easily searchable so that attendees can continue to communicate with one another and follow any updates from the organizing entity or from fellow participants (Gottlieb *et al.*, 2020; Meyer *et al.*, 2021). Event organizers can also make Slack channels dedicated to specific professional or personal interests which could prompt engagement after the conference ends. However, without an initial in-person introduction, participants may be less likely to form strong bonds which could encourage longer-term interactivity (Raes *et al.*, 2020). These findings suggest that in-person events coupled with

virtual touch points may be most effective at maintaining engagement long-term in a hybrid world.

NEXT STEPS

Primary data collection will explore how Career Connections may be able to improve, including probing on the perceived purpose of Career Connection seminars (e.g. professional development, alumni engagement, networking, recruiting, etc.), the kind and variety of seminar sessions available to participants, program alumni connection to one another and ECA, interest in long-term engagement by both presenters and participants, and experiences with virtual, in-person, and hybrid seminar formats.

ANNEX V: BIBLIOGRAPHY

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