Evaluation Matters: AEIF Case Study on Learning

The arTEA project, the inspiration of three Global UGRAD 2016-2017 alumni from Venezuela, is enriching the lives of children and young adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) through arts and creativity. #AEIF2017

THE EVALUATION

Why: The evaluation was intended to help ECA management make decisions about AEIF administration and address accountability objectives.

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What: The evaluation addressed the following five questions:

1. **How can the Office of Alumni Affairs improve the AEIF application and administration process?**

2. **What individual-level impacts has the AEIF program had on the alumni awardees?**

3. **To what extent has the AEIF program helped increase connections between**

THE PROGRAM

The ECA Evaluation Division conducted an evaluation of the ECA's Office of Alumni Affairs' (OAA) Alumni Engagement Innovation Fund (AEIF) program. Begun in 2011, AEIF creates a competitive opportunity for teams of alumni of qualifying U.S. government-funded exchange programs to generate innovative solutions to local, national, or regional problems through public service projects. AEIF promotes shared values and advances U.S. foreign policy priorities by requiring all funded projects to address strategic themes that are determined annually and prioritized throughout the grant competition. Each year, AEIF awards approximately 50 projects grant amounts ranging from $5,000 to $25,000. Since its inception, AEIF has funded nearly 500 community service projects all around the world.

KEY FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

» **Application Processes.** Alumni identified several challenges with the application process, including writing in English, fully articulating project ideas in limited space, developing budgets, identifying appropriate and strategic target audiences, and understanding why projects are not accepted.

» **Funding.** Although it is certainly allowable to apply for less than the maximum $25,000 grant limit, team members felt implicit pressure to take full advantage of the available funds, often developing projects that were too large for them to successfully implement.

» **Project implementation.** AEIF project teams faced a variety of challenges in implementing their projects, including ability of team members to prioritize the project over other obligations, project design (budgeting and cost, definition and recruitment of the target audience, and timelines), project and team location, partners, and community resistance to change.

» **Growth in skills and professional opportunities.** More than 85% of alumni enhanced their skills in leadership, networking, event planning, and budgeting & finances; 97% gained professional contacts by working on AEIF projects; and 75% reported that their AEIF project changed the focus of their career.

» **Community impact.** Participating in AEIF transformed how alumni understand social change and increased their self-confidence, specifically in their efficacy in being able to accomplish change in

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team members and establish more active membership of alumni networks on national, regional, and global levels?

4. **Did alumni AEIF projects help address or solve issues in the community or country?**

5. **How do AEIF grants help support U.S. foreign policy and public diplomacy goals?**

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Who: ECA's Evaluation Division contracted Global Dynamics Information Technology (GDIT) to conduct the evaluation.

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When: October 2017 to June 2019.

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How: GDIT conducted a mixed-methods evaluation design consisting of a document review, key informant interviews in eight countries, and a global online survey.

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How Much: $583,000

their communities: 99% agreed that their projects had a positive impact on the target populations and 84% reported that project participants shared what they learned, multiplying impacts to others in their communities.

» **Strengthened Embassy relationships.** Involvement with AEIF provided team members with more visibility into U.S. embassy programs, information, events, and other exchange opportunities. Forty-seven percent of survey respondents viewed AEIF as an asset in this regard, and 21% indicated that the AEIF experience helped them in applying for additional exchange opportunities.

INTEGRATING RECOMMENDATIONS

The OAA has already begun implementing recommendations from the evaluation report. Several revisions were made for the 2020 competition process, including:

» **Grant award amount clarifications.** The OAA is now working to encourage alumni teams to apply for smaller grants by stronger messaging that awards can be anywhere from $5,000 to $25,000. This is meant to encourage teams to implement smaller, but worthy projects, or to pilot larger projects before full roll-out.

» **Post-award meetings.** Embassies are now required to conduct post-award in-person meetings with their winning alumni teams to discuss award requirements, which is meant to ensure smoother project implementation and continue strengthening ties between alumni and embassies.

» **Sustainability plans.** Applicants are now required to submit sustainability plans as part of their application to help ensure that AEIF projects are continued beyond a single grant cycle, which can include plans for future project scale-up or simply project continuation with different funding sources.

» **Feedback to applicants.** Embassies are now encouraged to provide feedback to applicants whose projects are not chosen to help them understand why they were not successful and what they needed to do differently should they decide to apply again in the future.

» **Project design support.** By encouraging embassies to work closely with their alumni teams during the application phase, the OAA believes that alumni will receive the support requested around project design. That said, following this initial year of the new competition format, the intention is to survey Embassies to see if they were able to provide this kind of support and, if not, what support they would need in the future.

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If you are interested in learning more, you can find the full evaluation report here:
 https://eca.state.gov/impact/evaluation-eca/evaluation-initiative/completed-evaluations