



CREATING AND SUSTAINING COLLABORATIVE ALUMNI NETWORKS

American Councils for International Education: ACTR/ACCELS

Founded in 1974, American Councils has nearly 50 years of experience administering U.S. government (USG)-sponsored programs that strengthen international ties and mutual understanding through excellence in academic, professional and cultural exchange, language acquisition, educational development, and research programs. With offices in 30 countries, program activity in 80 countries, and over 100,000 alumni worldwide, American Councils empowers individuals and institutions to address challenges in a diverse and interconnected world.



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SUMMARY

In 2020, the Evaluation Division of the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) drafted a learning agenda to promote research on more efficient and effective exchange programming. One of the agenda's core learning questions was:



**U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE
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“What are the most effective ways to foster the creation and sustainment of networks that lead to collaboration among alumni, beneficiaries, and institutions?”

To answer this question, an American Councils for International Education: ACTR/ACCELS (American Councils) research team conducted interviews and working group discussions with dozens of staff members and partners who work on ECA-funded and other exchange programs – ranging from cultural exchange and language acquisition to higher education and professional and workforce development – in over 80 countries. The team explored successes and failures involved in the creation and sustainment of alumni networks; studied best practices that lead to more effective collaboration; discussed various approaches used in virtual and in-person, as well as formal and informal networks; and investigated how ongoing exchanges impact existing alumni networks.



Through its research, American Councils learned that the programmatic elements that influence the success of alumni networks can be divided into two elements:

- **FOUNDATIONAL FACTORS**
that consistently appear to increase a network's success
- **SUCCESS FACTORS**
that have broad application in the countries and programming areas included in the study.

These elements are culturally adaptable and customizable and have proven to be reliable across programs.

This summary of American Councils' findings is intended to assist implementers and funders in designing programs that produce active, collaborative, and sustainable alumni networks regardless of the sector in which they operate.





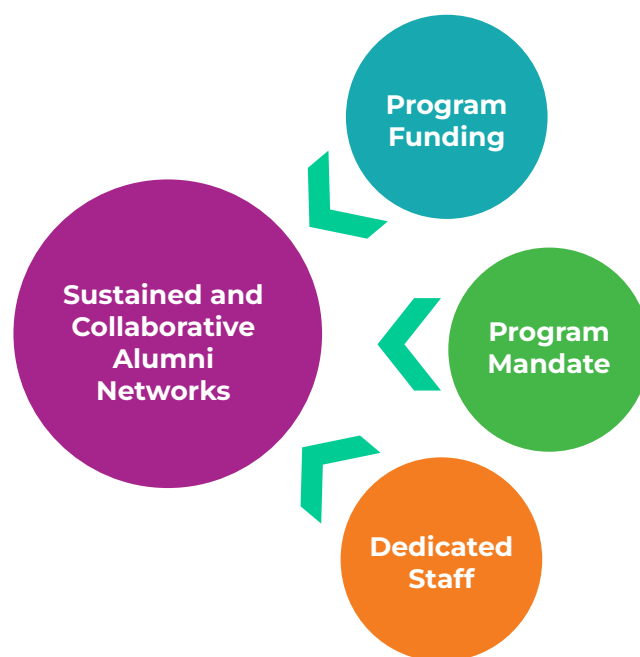
IMPACT OF FOUNDATIONAL FACTORS

Program Mandate, Funding, and Dedicated Staff

Key elements for building successful, active, and engaged alumni networks include a mandate from the funder to develop alumni programming, as well as dedicated funding and staff for that purpose.

When programs lack these basic underpinnings, successful alumni networks are nearly impossible to create and sustain systematically.

Without a mandate, program managers are unable to invest program resources (including staff) in long-term efforts to work with alumni, leading to inconsistent efforts and lost opportunities. For example, the Junior Faculty Development Program (JFDP), a successful university exchange program funded by ECA without a directive to develop an alumni network, resulted in limited, long-term alumni activity across Eurasia despite a 15-year program lifespan from 1998 to 2013. JFDP alumni networks did emerge in some locations; however, those that materialized were dependent upon individual initiatives and achieved haphazard results.



EducationUSA, a U.S. Department of State network of international student advising centers in more than 175 countries and territories that promotes U.S. higher education, is an effective, well-run, ECA-funded program without a mandate to develop alumni networks. EducationUSA staff are effectively prohibited from dedicating resources to developing an alumni network despite clear interest from participants and the benefits such a network would have in creating channels of support and opportunities for participants. In addition to a mandate, incorporating a paid employee whose job description includes developing programs for alumni also produced impressive evidence of increased alumni activity and opportunities for community collaboration.



Benefits of engaging alumni coordinators in programs can be found around the world. One example can be found in the Future Leaders Exchange Program (FLEX), a highly competitive secondary school exchange funded by the U.S. Department of State. In Poland, FLEX employs a dedicated part-time coordinator for 12-15 hours/week, who organized 87 activities across 16 cities for the program's 158 alumni in 2019 alone – an average of 1.7 events per week. In contrast, the YEAR program, a highly competitive university exchange program in a neighboring country also funded by the U.S. Department of State, had a similar number of alumni in 2019, but did not have a dedicated alumni coordinator, and no registered alumni activities were reported. With the addition of funding for a YEAR alumni coordinator in November 2021, three alumni events were organized in the first two months, with 38 alumni participating.



SUCCESS FACTORS

Program elements that enhance sustainability and collaborative activity in alumni programming

Once foundational factors for success -- a program mandate, funding, and dedicated staff -- are in place, adoption of the following factors -- in deliberate and strategic ways -- accelerated the development of alumni networks by ensuring they become more active and collaborative, thus leading to their sustainability.



INCENTIVES FOR ALUMNI PARTICIPATION

Offer alumni incentives for participation in programming such as exclusive access to events, speakers, professional development programs, and resources that support them and the causes that are important to them and their communities. This establishes greater collaboration among alumni, the program funder, and other beneficiaries.

The Professional Fellows Program (PFP), a short-term exchange program for young professionals funded by the U.S. Department of State Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, offers its alumni interesting program and professional development opportunities including:

1

Exclusive access to events:

A program coordinator works with U.S. embassies and consulates in each participating country to organize meetings with staff and invited guests visiting from the U.S.

2

Professional development programs:

In-person or online courses and small project grants are available to implement programming that supports the goals of PFP alumni in their home communities.



COMMUNICATION PLATFORM AND ALUMNI DATABASE

Maintain updated information about alumni and offer a communication platform. Platforms increase communication and collaboration among alumni by providing them with easy ways to connect with their peers. Updated databases support effective mailing lists, allow programs to connect alumni who have common interests, and match alumni with targeted opportunities made available by funders, partners, and other institutions. Moreover, keeping databases current allows programs to follow alumni pursuits and successes, affording programs additional opportunities to highlight alumni.



The Critical Language Scholarship Program (CLS), a summer study abroad language program for American college and university students funded by the U.S. Department of State, hosts a website with an alumni directory and language-specific Facebook and LinkedIn groups that connect alumni both socially and professionally. Alumni of the Open World Program, a short-term exchange for professionals administered by the Congressional Office for International Leadership, join dedicated Facebook groups created to encourage continued connections among alumni following their exchange. Alumni of the FLEX program hold regular “database drives,” encouraging coordinators to update databases, and making the process fun through gamification.

IDENTIFYING LEADERS IN THE ALUMNI COMMUNITY

Provide opportunities for active alumni to take on leadership roles in alumni networks. This promotes leadership development and highlights the achievements of alumni serving as positive role models and helping to sustain networks.

To advance leadership growth, the Kosovo American Education Fund (KAEF) Graduate Fellowship Program, which provides a fully funded master's level degree program in the U.S., offers alumni the chance to become members of its alumni association board.

Likewise, alumni of both FLEX and the Kennedy-Lugar Youth Exchange and Study program (YES), a secondary school exchange funded by the U.S. Department of State, are invited to volunteer as representatives of their programs in their respective cities.

By providing alumni leadership and training opportunities, these programs have successfully expanded the reach of their alumni networks and broadened pathways for alumni from underrepresented regions to increase collaboration with the program and with one another.





DEVELOPING SOCIAL CAPITAL



Organize social events. Alumni connected with their peers on a personal level increase interpersonal trust and are likely to attend future events and collaborate with members of their network in professional endeavors.

Armenian Junior Faculty Development Program (JFDP) alumni organized dinners that created friendships among participants. When program funding ended, these friendships persisted. The alumni network remains active today, ten years after the program closed.

FOSTERING NOSTALGIA

Offer alumni opportunities to relive and celebrate their exchange experience. Generating nostalgia supports and sustains alumni networks.

American Councils' secondary school alumni programs found that the most engaging social media posts involved alumni reminiscing through photos and videos featuring their exchange experience or via website articles in which alumni share their exchange year. Reunions of secondary school program participants are often the best attended events, and alumni appreciate receiving promotional materials with the program logo. Many program alumni participate in events where they are encouraged to wear their program t-shirts and share pictures from their program experiences. For example, annually on YES Appreciation Day, alumni join fellow participants and those who work to administer, fund, and support the exchange, to reflect on the value of the program and its impact on their lives.

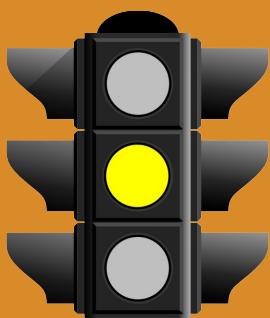




EMPLOYING A MIXTURE OF VIRTUAL AND IN-PERSON FORMATS BASED ON GOALS

Employ hybrid approaches that attract alumni from diverse backgrounds and increase effectiveness of interventions.

Survey results from U.S. Department of State-funded News/Media Literacy workshops for alumni, held separately in both in-person and online formats, showed a higher number of participants noting that the content was useful and effective in online formats. Online formats also provide avenues for engagement with participants from a broader range of cities and from rural areas, as well as with participants with disabilities and those from minority communities, many of whom belong to groups that face considerable obstacles to participating in in-person activities.



However, surveys also revealed potential weaknesses in online programming: significantly fewer online participants agreed that they had “formed at least one productive, long-lasting relationship with a fellow participant” compared to in-person participants (60% versus 90%). Such results are consistent with recent research on the topic. In-person programming remains critical to forging deeper bonds among participants and should be included as an important means for increasing alumni network sustainability.

CONTINUOUS ALUMNI ENGAGEMENT

Maintain at least four contact points per year with alumni to foster active alumni networks.

Alumni of USG exchange programs receive information – including application deadlines for other USG-funded programs – through alumni listservs and newsletters on a monthly basis, facilitating their continued engagement through opportunities for professional development.



GROUPING ALUMNI BY PROFESSIONAL THEMES

Offer programs and networking opportunities relevant to alumni's professional fields. Connecting alumni in groups according to their professional areas of interest, even from different exchange programs, helps maintain alliances and focuses alumni networks on professional pursuits.



The U.S.-Central Asia Education Foundation's (U.S.-CAEF) Enterprise Student Fellowship Program, which provides a fully funded degree for Central Asian students at elite Central Asian universities, offers alumni opportunities that cater to their professional fields or careers. Through such programs and subsequent interactions in alumni activities, alumni professional networks expand. Alumni who work together and connect professionally through an exchange program tend to have stronger allegiances to the program and form more committed alumni groups.

CONDUCTING SURVEYS OF ALUMNI

Focus program resources on what alumni want by periodically polling them on their expectations and then delivering on their requests.

A 2016 survey of approximately 7,000 American Councils' secondary school alumni revealed that:

87%

Of respondents were interested in leading training for other alumni.

61%

Of respondents surveyed were interested in writing news items and stories for the alumni website.

These numbers were higher than program staff expected and led to secondary school programs engaging more alumni as trainers, speakers, and authors of website articles. Alumni who are offered opportunities that interest them are more likely to participate in, and engage with, networks in the short- and long-term.

MEET ALUMNI WHERE THEY ARE IN LIFE

Engage alumni by taking into consideration where they are in their life cycle and how they might be best prepared to give back. Younger alumni tend to engage in alumni programming by offering their time (community service and volunteering), while older, more senior alumni are more likely to offer resources (professional access, donations).

The U.S.-CAEF program runs an "Idea Pitch" for young entrepreneurs. For this event, junior alumni contribute a great number of volunteer hours; senior U.S.-CAEF alumni, with more disposable income, contribute financial support to the event.

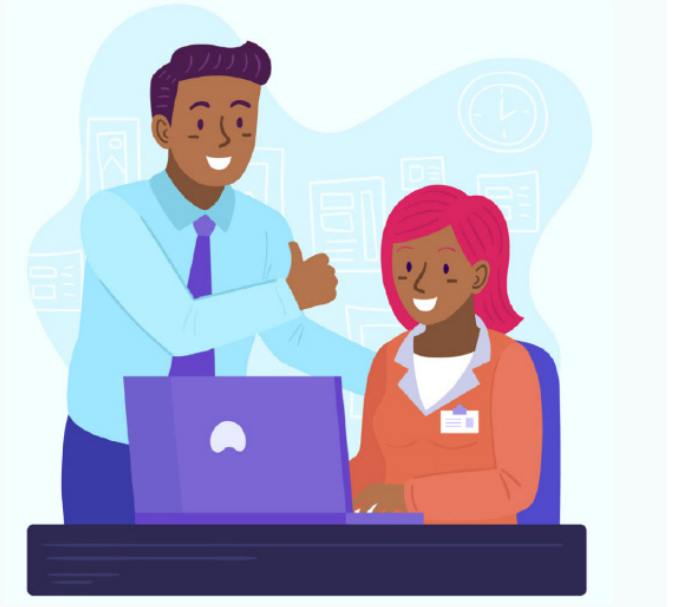




CONSIDER THE FUNDER'S STRATEGIC GOALS

Maximize resources used to support alumni programming by connecting alumni needs and interests with funder goals. Helping the funder achieve their goals ultimately increases the chances of sustained alumni funding.

The Exchanges to Internship Program, administered in Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, and Ukraine through funding from the U.S. Embassy in each country, has strengthened U.S. diplomatic connections with host country organizations and – by placing FLEX alumni in paid professional internships in their countries' local and national governments and civil society organizations – with potential future decision-makers. At the same time, the internships help alumni develop their professional careers by introducing them to work in the public and non-profit sectors.



ENSURE DIVERSITY IN ALUMNI NETWORK MEMBERSHIP



Ensure diverse membership in the alumni community by adopting a variety of programs specifically targeting those with diverse backgrounds, such as holding alumni events in underrepresented regions of a country and capitalizing on occasions to celebrate diversity.

The FLEX and YES programs organize programming around specific events such as the 30th Anniversary of the Americans Disability Act (ADA), during which alumni attended trainings on how to organized projects to support people with disabilities around the world and to highlight alumni with disabilities.



IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS IN APPLYING THE FOUNDATIONAL AND SUCCESS FACTORS

TIMING IS KEY

Based on the data collected and studied, American Councils understands that the timing of the inclusion of the aforementioned factors is critical: the earlier such elements are implemented in the life of a program, the stronger the alumni networks are likely to become.

In an ideal scenario, many of the success factors will be integrated into the program at the pre-program stage, meaning prior to the start of the participants' program experience. Factors can be introduced during the application stage and at the pre-departure orientation. Indeed, alumni programming should be promoted and described throughout the program and become an established feature of each participant's experience.



The best programs promote alumni programming at the start and then reemphasize it during on-program activities and at re-entry workshops. This regular exposure to alumni programming ideas and opportunities both informs and prepares students to engage in networks upon their return home. By introducing alumni activities early and connecting participants to program alumni, participants think ahead and consider how they too can become part of the alumni community and emulate alumni, whom they will see as role models.

LATENT NETWORKS CAN BE REACTIVATED

There is evidence that inactive alumni networks can be reactivated despite periods of dormancy. Alumni engagement efforts in Uzbekistan were put on hold for more than a decade due to concerns for the safety of staff and participants. In recent years, after a change in the country's political environment, alumni programming has returned to the country, and participation has far exceeded expectations, with alumni both attending events in large numbers and volunteering to organize their own activities.

In another example, prior to the global COVID-19 pandemic, the Open World Program did not include



a mandate for alumni programming and offered very limited alumni opportunities. When travel was put on hold during the pandemic, Open World Program funders amended the program, allowing staff to support virtual alumni programming. There was tremendous interest, and today Open World alumni and their hosts meet and collaborate online, many for the first time since their exchange programs, which in some cases was over a decade ago. With the proper foundational support, alumni networks can be reactivated.



CAN ALUMNI NETWORKS SUCCEED WITHOUT SUPPORT?

The above discussion is not meant to suggest that collaborative alumni networks cannot succeed without the foundational and success factors mentioned above. The American Councils research team learned of instances in which active alumni networks emerged and sustained themselves over periods of time without the aforementioned foundational or success factors. The JFDP program alumni network in Armenia, mentioned previously, is one such example. This alumni network continues to communicate regularly and, until the pandemic, met multiple times per month – more than ten years after the program formally closed. How was this achieved? A small group of remarkably active, engaged alumni volunteered their time to maintain



the network. While this is an extraordinary and praiseworthy outcome, it is unlikely to replicate. This network was an exception, with JFDP networks simply nonexistent in most other countries where the program was administered. Approaching alumni networks without solid support and critical guidance jeopardizes the success of the endeavor altogether.

CONCLUSION

When the foundations for success are put in place and the success factors are strategically deployed, American Councils' experience has shown that alumni networks can be created and sustained in ways that promote long-term collaboration among alumni, beneficiaries, and institutions. Alumni programs, at their very essence, allow original program goals and objectives to extend far beyond the life cycle of the program itself. When alumni programming exists, alumni shine a light on and share lessons learned from their experience for the benefit of others in their networks and communities, ultimately multiplying the impact of their program experience.

Embedding the foundational and success factors outlined above in exchange program design should serve ECA and other funders well across their program portfolios, supporting effective, enduring programs across age groups, program types, and countries.

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