

BUREAU OF EDUCATIONAL AND CULTURAL AFFAIRS

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



**FY 2022-2026
LEARNING AGENDA**

SEPTEMBER 2022

LEARNING



INTRODUCTION

The Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs' (ECA) Monitoring, Evaluation, Learning and Innovation (MELI) Unit is dedicated to enhancing the effectiveness of the bureau's programs. In accordance with guidance from the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) (OMB M-19-23 and OMB M-21-27), the MELI Unit has developed a multi-year Learning Agenda. A learning agenda is a set of questions addressing critical knowledge gaps that, when answered, enable more efficient and effective programming. It also identifies how the bureau will answer those questions and translate evidence into learning through specific, planned activities. ECA's Learning Agenda, managed by MELI, helps the bureau set knowledge and information priorities, including evaluations and research activities.

ECA continually collects data through performance monitoring, partner reporting, evaluations, and pilot initiatives. These data are used to determine whether programs are achieving bureau goals and objectives and whether program modifications are necessary. Through the Learning Agenda, ECA will continue to prioritize and refine its monitoring, evaluation, learning, and innovation efforts to ensure that its programming is evidence-informed, relevant, dynamic, and responsive.

LEARNING AGENDA QUESTIONS

ECA's Learning Agenda establishes the information the bureau wants to know through a series of eight (8) broad research questions and corresponding, detailed sub-questions.

These questions, listed below, reflect the bureau's research priorities for fiscal years 2022 through 2026. The Learning Agenda also outlines activities intended to answer those questions through an implementation plan, which can be found at the end of this document.



1

To what extent are ECA's participant recruitment and selection processes aligned with achieving strategic goals?

- a.** What steps can ECA take to address barriers to participation in its exchanges and public engagement activities?
- b.** To what extent are ECA programs successful in recruiting participants that are most appropriate for program objectives?
- c.** How can ECA improve outreach to better reach desired audiences for exchanges and public engagement activities?
- d.** How can ECA enhance equity in the participant selection process in the bureau, with Posts, and among implementing partners?
- e.** How can selection processes for ECA exchanges and public engagement activities be leveraged to contribute to enhanced equity in program outcomes?

2

To what extent and in what ways are ECA programs responsive and adaptable to evolving foreign policy priorities?

- a.** In what ways do Posts and regional bureaus leverage ECA programs to achieve their objectives?
- b.** In what ways do BridgeUSA programs contribute to Post objectives?
- c.** To what extent do ECA exchanges and public engagement activities build skills of emerging and established U.S. and foreign leaders necessary to mitigate climate change?
- d.** How can ECA programs be leveraged to counter disinformation?
- e.** How can ECA best optimize public/private partnerships to advance U.S. foreign policy priorities?



3

What role does program diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) play in participant experience and the effectiveness of exchanges and public engagement activities?

- a. To what extent are the outcomes of ECA programs experienced equitably across diverse populations, both for American and foreign participants?
- b. How does expanded DEIA in program design and participant selection affect long-term outcomes?
- c. To what extent do ECA programs focused on leadership development integrate diverse perspectives into content and training materials?
- d. How can ECA enhance diversity among U.S. host community locations, community types, and families? And what role does host community diversity have on outcomes for foreign exchange participants and host communities?
- e. How can ECA programs be responsive to stakeholder feedback in order to actively foster an inclusive environment during program implementation?

4

How do variations in program design contribute to changes in ECA program outcomes?

- a. To what extent, and in what ways, does pre-program support shape program experiences and outcomes for participants?
- b. How does program length shape outcomes for both program participants and host communities?
- c. How do the outcomes of virtual programming compare to in-person programs? And to what extent do these outcomes vary across participant groups with different dimensions of diversity?
- d. What are the most effective ways to set the stage for alumni engagement during program implementation?
- e. How can ECA best optimize public/private partnerships to advance U.S. foreign policy priorities?



5

In what ways do alumni of exchanges and public engagement activities amplify the impact of ECA programs within their home communities?

- a.** What post-program engagements (e.g., grants, follow-on projects, networking opportunities) most effectively expand the impact of alumni? To what extent does this vary across participant groups with different dimensions of diversity?
- b.** To what extent do ECA alumni influence cross-cultural attitude and knowledge change among members of their home communities following their exchange?
- c.** What contextual factors facilitate or hinder alumni's ability to effect change in their home communities? And what types of change do alumni effect?
- d.** To what extent does participation in ECA programs increase alumni engagement with Posts and broader USG initiatives?
- e.** To what extent do alumni sustain connections made during exchange programs and public engagement activities? And how do these networks contribute to long-term program goals?



6

To what extent do ECA alumni contribute to long-term, systems-level changes in their communities, institutions, and home countries?

- a.** In what ways do ECA exchange programs and public engagement activities interplay with other diplomatic engagements to foster changes in national, regional, and local policies?
- b.** How do exchange programs and public engagement activities support career growth and advancement to leadership positions among alumni, especially within the public service sector?
- c.** What role do cross-cultural competencies gained on exchange programs play in the long-term work of alumni?
- d.** How does increased understanding of democracy, the USG, and the American people among ECA alumni contribute to long-term effects in democracy, rights, and governance in their home communities?
- e.** To what extent do ECA alumni go on to influence foreign relations between the United States and partners around the world?
- f.** In what ways does exchange programming provide long-term benefits to the American people?



7

How can ECA continue to improve monitoring and evaluation in support of evidence-informed decision-making?

- a.** What types of evidence can the MELI Unit build to demonstrate exchange programs and public engagement activities' contribution to long-term, sustained changes in communities?
- b.** How can senior leaders better leverage performance management and evaluation findings in decision-making?
- c.** How can ECA leverage equity-focused monitoring and evaluation to promote DEIA in our programs?
- d.** What monitoring and evaluation processes best promote evidence-informed decision-making within the bureau?
- e.** How can ECA best leverage stakeholder records and contact information for monitoring, evaluation, and learning efforts?

8

How can effective learning and information-sharing be leveraged to foster collaboration and mitigate silos across ECA offices?

- a.** What are the most effective strategies for identifying evidence gathered across ECA programs and communicating lessons learned to diverse audiences?
- b.** What role does the MODE Framework play in advancing learning for ECA programs?
- c.** How can the MELI Unit improve information-sharing on effective monitoring and evaluation practices with other federal agencies, international organizations, NGOs, and/or the private sector?
- d.** How can ECA program offices better coordinate work on shared goals and program types?
- e.** How can ECA enhance coordination within the Department of State (e.g., regional bureaus and posts)?



ANTICIPATED CHALLENGES AND MITIGATION STRATEGIES

The MELI Unit may encounter challenges in implementing the Learning Agenda related to: prioritizing learning activities in alignment with bureau needs, and available time and resources; building meaningful buy-in across the bureau for participation in learning activities; and avoiding data gathering fatigue on the part of program staff and other stakeholders.

MELI will mitigate these potential challenges throughout learning agenda planning and implementation. As part of its annual planning process, MELI will identify up to three Learning Agenda questions to prioritize for the upcoming year, based on bureau needs and availability of existing evidence. Once the priority questions are identified, MELI will also consult with bureau stakeholders to refine and plan specific learning activities for the upcoming year. In addition to building buy-in for the learning agenda, these consultations will also help MELI ensure that activities are best positioned to generate new learning that adds value to ECA stakeholders.

To the greatest extent possible, MELI will also work to align learning activities with evidence gathering activities that MELI, or the wider bureau, are already planning to carry out. This will help ensure that learning activities are integrated with existing work, minimizing the additional time and effort needed for their implementation. In those instances where standalone learning activities are needed to answer a particular question, MELI will take staff availability, program timelines, and process efficiency considerations into account to minimize data gathering fatigue and maintain stakeholder buy-in.

DISSEMINATION STRATEGIES

Learning is not simply composed of generating knowledge, but also about interpreting and using that information. The MELI Unit plans to utilize a comprehensive dissemination strategy to cultivate a culture of learning within the bureau and ensure that ECA is continually improving the effectiveness and efficiency of its programming. MELI's approach to dissemination builds on its six lines of effort, while continuing to cultivate new avenues for learning to meet stakeholders' needs. Specifically, this includes a three-part, cyclical process to ensure that insights gained through learning activities produce learning for the bureau. First, as the evidence is gathered through learning activities, MELI will



develop summary briefs to share emerging evidence and lessons learned on specific learning agenda questions. Next, through facilitated pause-and-reflect sessions, MELI will encourage specific offices across the bureau to identify actionable steps for using the learning generated, including recommendations for program teams, future learning activities, ideas for innovative projects, or strategic decision-making, processes, policies, or procedures. Finally, MELI will share learning to a wider audience, including publishing learning resources on its website, semi-annual updates to the wider bureau on progress toward Learning Agenda evidence and implications for the bureau’s work, and sharing learnings as part of its capacity-building efforts with ECA program teams, implementers, and other stakeholders across the Department.

Implementation Plan

The following tables provide a high-level overview of the MELI Unit’s four-year approach to learning. MELI is responsive to bureau need and administration priorities. Accordingly, MELI updates a detailed version of this plan as part of its annual planning process. Table 1 outlines the learning agenda questions and the activities intended to answer those questions. It also details the Functional Bureau Strategy goals (“FBS”) and Department of State Learning Agenda questions (“DOS”) that each question speaks to. The methods for each learning activity are detailed in Table 2.



Table 1: Implementation Overview

Question*	Operational or Strategic	F B S	D O S	Learning Activity Type(s)							Timing
				Evaluation	Research	Desk Review	Monitoring (MODE)	Pilot Programming	Expert Convenings	Existing Knowledge	
1. To what extent are ECA's participant recruitment and selection processes aligned with achieving strategic goals?	Strategic	1 3		X	X	X	X		X	X	Short term - learning expected by 2026
2. To what extent and in what ways are ECA programs responsive and adaptable to evolving foreign policy priorities?	Strategic	1 2	1.3 1.4 3.3 5	X	X	X	X			X	Long term - learning underway through 2026 and beyond
3. What role does program diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) play in participant experience and the effectiveness of exchanges and public engagement activities?	Strategic	1 3		X		X	X			X	Short term - learning expected by 2026
4. How do variations in program design contribute to changes in ECA program outcomes?	Strategic	1 3		X	X	X	X	X		X	Short term - learning expected by 2026

*Note: While Table 1 only lists the main Learning Agenda questions, the activities listed are applicable to both the main question and its corresponding sub-questions outlined above.

Learning Activity Type(s)

Question*	Operational or Strategic	FBS	DOS	Learning Activity Type(s)							Timing
				Evaluation	Research	Desk Review	Monitoring (MODE)	Pilot Programming	Expert Convenings	Existing Knowledge	
5. In what ways do alumni of exchanges and public engagement activities amplify the impact of ECA programs within their home communities?	Strategic	1 2		X	X	X	X			X	Long term - learning underway through 2026 and beyond
6. To what extent do ECA alumni contribute to long-term, systems-level changes in their communities, institutions, and home countries?	Strategic	1		X	X	X	X				Long term - learning underway through 2026 and beyond
7. How can ECA continue to improve monitoring and evaluation in support of evidence-informed decision-making?	Operational	3	1.5 8		X	X	X	X	X	X	Short term - learning expected by 2026
8. How can effective learning and information-sharing be leveraged to foster collaboration and mitigate silos across ECA offices?	Operational	3				X	X	X	X	X	Short term - learning expected by 2026

***Note:** While Table 1 only lists the main Learning Agenda questions, the activities listed are applicable to both the main question and its corresponding sub-questions outlined above.

Table 2: Activity and Methodology Detail

Learning Activity Type	Methodology
Evaluation	<p>Evaluation is a one-time systematic collection and analysis of information about the characteristics and outcomes of programs, projects, or processes as a basis for making judgments, improving effectiveness, and informing decisions about current and future programs, projects, and processes. The MELI Unit prioritizes the use of evaluations and has built its practices and procedures around maximizing the utilization of evaluation findings and recommendations. MELI typically employs a mixed-methods approach in its evaluation design, drawing on methods such as surveys, interviews, and focus group discussions. MELI is responsive to evaluation requests from program offices and senior leadership and will consider the Learning Agenda when drafting evaluation questions or when prioritizing evaluations (if limited resources prevent MELI from pursuing all requested evaluations in a year).</p>
Research	<p>Research refers to activities that generate new knowledge on issue areas related to public diplomacy broadly, not specific to any one program. As resources allow, the MELI Unit may undertake or contract research projects designed to answer key questions related to public diplomacy or undertake these initiatives themselves. Some examples of these initiatives include Diplomacy Lab projects, evaluation syntheses, and other standalone research projects.</p>
Desk Review	<p>A Desk Review consists of systematically reviewing, analyzing, and interpreting existing research, reports, and primary documents related to a given topic. This may include both literature and document reviews. Literature Reviews survey the state of published articles around a question. Document reviews go beyond scholarly articles and collect data from primary sources such as administrative records, reports, and other program documents. As resources allow, the MELI Unit may initiate or contract desk reviews to help answer Learning Agenda questions.</p>



Learning Activity Type	Methodology
Performance Monitoring (MODE)	<p>Performance Monitoring refers to ongoing measurement of current programming which considers whether existing efforts are producing desired results. The Monitoring Data for ECA (MODE) Framework, the bureau’s standardized results framework, enables the MELI Unit to monitor performance across ECA programs and track the pace, magnitude, and direction of change. The MODE Framework concentrates data collection on three primary audiences: participants, host community members and institutions, and program alumni. MELI will draw heavily on rich data gathered through the MODE Framework to help answer Learning Agenda questions, especially those related to program participation and implementation.</p>
Pilot Programming	<p>Pilots are short-term, time-bound tests of new approaches to ECA’s work. The MELI Unit may develop a pitch for a pilot initiative based on questions in the Learning Agenda. Alternatively, MELI may support pilots led by other ECA program offices and will document important learnings to be shared with the wider bureau.</p>
Expert Convenings	<p>Expert Convenings bring together researchers, practitioners, and other stakeholders to get an understanding of what is "known." This may include convenings organized by the MELI Unit specifically to discuss what is known on a given topic or convenings organized by other stakeholders within ECA, the Department, or externally, which MELI may attend if they are relevant to a Learning Agenda question.</p>
Existing Knowledge	<p>Existing Bureau Knowledge (Secondary Analysis) refers to collecting, compiling, and synthesizing knowledge existing within ECA program offices and implementing partners for collective learning throughout the bureau. The MELI Unit may work with program offices and/or implementing partners to collect their input related to a given Learning Agenda question, through surveys, formal/informal discussions, or other means.</p>



ABOUT THE MONITORING, EVALUATION, LEARNING, AND INNOVATION UNIT

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

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

If you would like additional information or have any questions, please contact us at ECAevaluation@state.gov



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Learning. Innovation.