

Example of a commentary to *Fulbright Chronicles*

**Reimagining the Fulbright Scholar Program in the Post-Covid-19 Era**

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Abstract

Covid-19 is radically reshaping everything in our world including faculty exchange programs such as Fulbright. The impact this will have on the Fulbright Scholar program going forward is presently unknown, but it could be an opportunity for reimagining the US flagship international exchange program in ways that are more flexible and responsive to societal needs. This contribution is based in part upon an OP-ED previously appearing in *Times Higher Education*, 2020, April 25.

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The Fulbright Scholar Program will soon be celebrating the 75th year of its existence. Additionally, with the end of the Covid-19 pandemic in sight, it would seem to be an ideal time to pause and evaluate where it is going and what changes could be instituted to make it even better than it is.

The Fulbright Scholar Program was the brainchild of Senator J. William Fulbright who, based on his experiences in the Second World War, proposed a bilateral international exchange program for US and foreign scholars.

One can't argue with the outstanding success of the Fulbright program. More than 360,000 persons have participated in the Fulbright program since it began. Notably, 54 Fulbright alumni have won Nobel Prizes, 82 have won Pulitzer Prizes, 37 have become heads of state or government, 31 were named MacArthur Fellows, and 16 were named Presidential Medal of Freedom recipients. This legacy places the Fulbright program in

rarified space, the end result of which is to foster enthusiastic bipartisan support from politicians in our federal government.

Ambitious in its aspirations, the Fulbright Program was conceived as one of the best ways to build a more peaceful world and mutual understanding between the people of the US and other countries. The cornerstone of the Fulbright scholar experience is the cultural exchange that aims to develop empathy and create understanding. Fulbrighters interact with foreign colleagues on an individual basis in the classroom, laboratory, field, home, and in the patterns of daily life lived in a different culture. These experiences permit Fulbrighters to gain a deep appreciation of others' viewpoints and beliefs, the way they do things and, most importantly, the way they think.

### **The Disruptive Impact of Covid-19 on the Fulbright Program**

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Fulbright Program was officially paused on 20 March, 2020. Thus, both student and faculty awardees from the 2019-2020 cohort had their missions abruptly ended and most returned to the US with unfinished projects.

Given the suddenness of the announcement, some Fulbrighters experienced confusion over the costs of leaving, including booking suddenly scarce flights and reimbursements for housing expenses that had been prepaid. Upon returning to the US, some grantees also suffered from a loss of income from their stipends, unemployment, the unexpected need for housing, and interruption of health insurance. Indeed, some Fulbrighters felt strongly that travelling put them in more danger than sheltering in place. This led some to experience stress-related issues including the fear that they might be unknowingly transmitting Covid-19 during and after their flights home.

Let's be clear, many individuals are suffering far worse fates than Fulbrighters have experienced from the pandemic. But it should be noted that it takes a significant amount of time to plan and develop a good Fulbright application (typically 12 to 18 months) and then have it go through the six-month review process. This includes the creation of a convincing narrative, getting references, making contact with host institutions and then arranging for sabbaticals or time away from jobs. If an applicant is successful, plans must also be made to accommodate their families, apply for visas, and undergo standard physical examinations.

Some Fulbrighters who had their missions disrupted expressed the view that they would have liked to have been given the opportunity to resume their work after the pandemic had passed in the form of a "make-up" grant. But whether this will be an option is unknown.

There is also a category of Fulbrighters who were about to leave for their missions last spring but had their awards put on hold. If and when that hold will be lifted is uncertain. The status of awardees from foreign countries who are presently in the US is also unclear but some news reports indicate that many apparently stayed on and continued their projects.

News reports also indicated that some disrupted Fulbrighters continued their research and teaching by operating remotely. However, in the future, it is difficult to conceive that this

flagship exchange program in the post-Covid-19 era can effectively morph into a telecommunicated distance experience that is devoid of the face-to-face contact that has been the core of the Fulbright experience.

### **The Fulbright Program Moving Forward**

So how might the Fulbright experience change after the coronavirus crisis? A hybrid model that includes an element of video conferencing combined with the traditional, in-country experience could be a routine, and even desirable, part of the program's future.

What is also likely to change is the length of stay (perhaps shorter stays will be preferred), more rigorous evaluations regarding the adequacy of healthcare in the host country, and greater monitoring and reporting of in-country political strife and health conditions.

There should also be more in-depth reviews of awardees' medical status (both physical and emotional) prior to the acceptance of an award, and heightened post-award reporting and monitoring of their health status during and after a Fulbright stay.

Importantly, it would also be wise to have fully documented and transparent plans for major catastrophic events such that Fulbrighters would know precisely what the US State Department is and is not responsible for during a global emergency.

Lastly, the Fulbright program could benefit from a thorough reexamination of its entire portfolio of programs which would include the financing of their initiatives, the diversity of program participants, public-private partnerships in host countries, the elevation of technology in programing, increasing transparency on information about awards, and improving information delivered to the public about the success of the Fulbright program. While Fulbright has always done a good job in many of these areas, it could be time to review long accepted guidelines and elevate standards to a higher level of surveillance.

### **The Fulbright Program Will Survive and Thrive**

With such disruptive changes caused by the Covid-19 outbreak, it is hard to see clearly what the world will look like when the pandemic recedes. In the short term, reductions in student and faculty exchanges are likely. However, in the long term, higher education depends on globalization, student and faculty mobility, internationalization initiatives, collaborative research, and global knowledge networking.

One thing is sure: as the gold standard in international scholarly exchanges, we will need a flourishing, flexible and pandemic-prepared Fulbright Scholars Program providing future Fulbrighters with life-changing cultural and educational experiences that lead to better mutual understanding.

In addition to the Peace Corps program, the Fulbright program is considered to be one of the most important ways for the U.S. to exercise soft power as part of its public diplomacy

agenda. Famously, J. William Fulbright expressed the mission of the Fulbright Program as this: “to see the world as others see it”. Continuing that vision will help us to heal after this difficult time, move towards compassion for others who are different from us, and enable progress towards a more peaceful world.

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