

*Example of a scholar article to the Fulbright Chronicles*

**A Fulbright Teaching and Research Mission to Thailand**

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Abstract

As a Fulbright Senior Scholar to Thailand, my goal was to help leading Thai universities (Chulalongkorn, Khon Kaen, Burapha and Chiang Mai) to assist in the developing of contemporary psychology. This included teaching Thai students in the modern field of behavioral neuroscience, assisting with curriculum development, and mentoring students and faculty in scholarship and pedagogy. This is a shortened version of a paper appearing in the *International Psychology Bulletin*, 2018, 22 (2), 11-24.



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Early in my academic career I had little interest in applying for a Fulbright Scholar Award. Though I had known about the program since graduate school days and had talked with some former Fulbrighters concerning their awards, I was too consumed with my own teaching and research responsibilities at my university to give it very much serious thought. However, once I advanced to the level of Full Professor, I concluded that it would be a good next step in my career. To say that I am incredibly happy to have made the decision to apply for and eventually receive two Fulbright awards is an understatement. It changed my life.

As a bench scientist in the field of behavioral neuroscience at a large public research-intensive institution, I had enjoyed a wonderful career of scholarship, teaching and the training of both undergraduate and graduate students. But I had become myopic, complacent and indeed even ethnocentric in my views. I felt the need to get out of my zone of comfort and challenge myself to do something beyond what I was presently doing. Indeed, I would say that I also felt the need to connect and contribute to something beyond myself in whatever humble form that it might take. The Fulbright program proved to be the perfect vehicle for me to help another country so as to contribute to the development of my own discipline, a discipline that has given me so much over the course of a very rewarding career.

As I researched the application process for a Fulbright Award and talked with other Fulbrighters about their experiences, I also studied the status of the discipline of psychology in different parts of the world. I had travelled to many European countries for professional meetings and knew something of the culture and history of psychology there. A Fulbright application to a European country did not appeal to me because I considered it to be

too close to my own culture and background and because psychology was relatively well developed in this region of the world. Also, I wanted to challenge myself more by going to a part of the world and a culture I had never experienced. I wanted to get outside my own Western culture as much as possible. I wanted to force myself to learn new things such as language, customs, people and history. Importantly, I wanted to do a Fulbright in a region of the world where I thought I could make a difference in spreading the discipline of psychology in a place where the study of behavior was truly in its infancy.

Eventually I determined that Southeast Asia fit me perfectly. I learned that modern Western psychology in this region of the world, with few exceptions (Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia among them) was underdeveloped and in many cases dominated by Eastern Buddhist psychology. After considerable study and reflection, I determined that the beautiful and culturally rich country of Thailand would be the place to accomplish my goal. I came to this decision because this country represented a radical cultural change from what I had experienced in my own life and because the study of modern Western psychology was truly in its infancy at this time. While I had never visited this country, I had talked with many who loved their time there and spoke highly of the hospitality and friendliness of the Thai people. I further learned that its economy was growing, and I was intrigued by its people, culture, Buddhist traditions and history.

### **Fulbright Mission 2006-2007**

My first application for a Fulbright Scholar Award to Thailand in 2004 was turned down but I was not disappointed. Because I knew that this was frequently the case for a first application, I reapplied the next year and was rewarded with a positive outcome. Importantly, I sought help from the Fulbright staff in my second application and I believe that their input put me over the top in the decision-making process.

Truth be told, a world shattering and sadly tragic event occurred at this time that made my application even more relevant. I was jolted by the events of the December 26th, 2004 Tsunami in Phuket, Thailand that killed many people and left untold numbers with emotional scars. During this crisis, Thai mental health care workers were compassionate but largely untrained. As a result, they were frequently helpless in assisting the many people who survived but were psychologically damaged from the aftermath. Thanks to the benevolence of the United States and many other countries, Western trained psychologists descended upon this area to provide much needed professional assistance and comfort, especially for the many people who were suffering from clinical depression, anxiety and post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

I arranged to spend my Fulbright time in Thailand at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok. This university is considered Thailand's best and most comprehensive and, as it turns out, was the only institution of higher learning in this country with a standalone psychology faculty at the time. Established in 1996 by a royal decree from the King of Thailand, the psychology faculty was originally a part of the education school prior to receiving its autonomy. As it existed at the time, the department had a vigorous

undergraduate program that included most of the major areas of specialization in psychology. At the graduate level, it also offered Master's Degrees in counseling, social, developmental and industrial/organizational psychology. At the doctoral level, the department offered the Ph.D. in counseling, social and developmental psychology. Notably absent from their undergraduate and graduate offerings was the kind of standard coursework one would see in the West including experimental psychology, behavioral neuroscience, and clinical psychology.

The core of my application involved teaching a course in my specialty of behavioral neuroscience, curriculum development, and mentoring of faculty in scholarly publishing and student centered teaching. Importantly, I oriented the contents of the course toward the biological basis of psychopathology. With the considerable scientific advances that have been made in behavioral neuroscience over the last 30 years, this specialty has become instrumental in the search for the biological underpinnings of both normal and abnormal behavior. It is especially important for understanding the etiology and treatment of behavior disorders such as alcohol and substance abuse, neurotic and psychotic behaviors (e.g., schizophrenia, manic-depression), depression and a range of childhood disorders (autism, Asperger's, attention deficit, anorexia) that we see in people from all cultures, races, ethnic groups, and geographic areas of the world. My feeling was that the course content would be invaluable for those students who were planning on doing graduate work in psychology that would involve some level of mental health care involvement, a critical need especially after the Tsunami exposed the lack of manpower and shortcomings in the practice of clinical psychology in Thailand.

My stay at Chulalongkorn University was very productive and I was able to accomplish the goals I stated. Moreover, I was invited to lecture in many other Thai universities and medical schools and expose faculty, staff and students to a wide range of topics in the modern discipline of psychology. This laid the foundation for a greater awareness of what it takes to build a more contemporary infrastructure for the discipline of psychology and how, once in place, this could be critical for improving the Thai mental healthcare system.

### **Fulbright Mission 2014-2015**

While much was accomplished during my first Fulbright stay in Thailand, I increasingly felt that I could be doing much more to advance the discipline of psychology in this country. I authored a comprehensive assessment of the status of psychology in this country and ASEAN in general. It reviewed the progress that had been made but was also honest about how much more needed to be done. This publication provided the basis for a second Fulbright stay in Thailand in 2014-2015.

In 2013, I contacted three prominent Thai universities (Chiang Mai University, Khon Kaen University, and Burapha University) about the possibility of my coming to their institutions to assist in the development of contemporary psychology. By this time, psychology was developing quite well at Bangkok universities like Chulalongkorn and Thammasat. However, at institutions outside this urban area, psychology was largely

confined to a few course in education departments. The universities I approached were all large, distinguished institutions from regions outside of Bangkok. All three shared the fact that psychology development was in its early stages, all were poised to take the necessary steps to further develop this discipline, and all eagerly reached out to me by providing strong letters of invitation to come to their universities.

In my application, I proposed to spend three months at each campus, at which time I would speak both formally and informally with administrators, faculty and students about further developing the modern discipline of psychology, evaluating present curriculum, and making suggestions for possible change. To that end, I created a short course entitled: “The Modern Discipline of Psychology: From the Laboratory to Practical Application”. The content of the course consisted of a menu of 16 self-contained lectures I developed (each one about 60 minutes long) which described cutting edge research across the entire spectrum of subspecialties in psychology.

The results of my second Fulbright stay are still being measured. Clearly, there is considerable energy among the universities I visited to develop their own standalone psychology departments. This is also fueled by the increasing government pronouncements attesting to how the mental health needs of the Thai people are being underserved. Clearly, these institutions are poised to begin the process of capacity building in the development of psychology training at both the undergraduate and graduate level. However, as the saying goes, talk is cheap and as yet Khon Kaen, Burapha and Chiang Mai Universities are still without their own standalone psychology faculties. This is due to two primary reasons: the political and economic unrest in Thailand as a result of several military coups in the last 10 years; and the passing of Thailand’s long-time and beloved King Bhumibol Adulyadej and the uncertainties of the policies and potential influence of his son Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn. These events have stalled many planned reforms in Thailand’s higher education and health policy.

### **The Future of Psychology in Thailand**

My time as a Fulbrighter in Thailand clearly revealed that there is a tremendous need in this country for the development of curriculum that meets Western standards for undergraduate and graduate training in psychology while at the same time respecting the traditions of Eastern and Buddhist psychology. I concluded that many more institutions, both public and private, need to develop standalone psychology departments and faculty that present modern psychology in all of its specialties, but most critically in clinical psychology. I continue to believe that once this infrastructure is in place, a concerted effort should then be placed upon improving the education and training of Thai graduate students desiring to become clinical psychologists. Presently, training overseas is an option in combination with the development of joint programs with other countries. However, homegrown (Thai) Ph.D. programs in clinical psychology and other subspecialties should be the ultimate goal. Indeed, the professionalization of Thai psychologists and their ultimate ability to shed the status of “second class citizen” to psychiatrists, is

critically dependent upon growing the psychology infrastructure in their higher education system.

I further concluded that the continued development of a more sophisticated psychology infrastructure in Thailand will have long lasting implications for the next generation of Thais who increasingly are seeking mental health care as an integral part of their physical health and well-being. If psychology is allowed to grow and flourish in Thai universities and high schools in the same way in which it has throughout much of the rest of the world, there will be significant tangible benefits for the Thai people. One of these outcomes, the additional trained manpower that is needed to properly diagnose and treat those individuals who are suffering from mental illness, is particularly crucial for Thailand's continued development as an emerging modern nation that cares about its citizens quality of life.

### **How My Fulbright Work Impacted Me**

My Fulbright work enabled me to give back to my discipline and to help the higher education system of another country. But it also helped me to be a better teacher in my classrooms back in the U.S. by enabling me to stretch myself in a cross-cultural, global manner. For example, the discipline of psychology suffers from the fact that it is dominated by Western thinking. As it is taught in the U.S., it typically does not include the beliefs of important cultural, religious and philosophical traditions that are firmly entrenched in other parts of the world. A case in point is the important findings of Buddhist psychologists in the areas of mindfulness and meditation. These practices are routinely used in some Asian countries to successfully treat behavior disorders like depression and drug addiction and, as these practices become more evidence based, they are slowly finding their way into mainstream clinical practice in the west. As I have learned more about the work of Buddhist psychologists, I have tried to include their practices and beliefs in the content of courses I teach in the U.S.

I have commented to many that my involvement with the Fulbright program has been my most fulfilling and important career accomplishment. The results of Fulbright awards can be measured in many different ways. Certainly, the standard measures of published research, creation of future collaborations with foreign colleagues, successful teaching of foreign students, and involvement with curriculum and faculty development come to mind. From my perspective, however, nothing can really match the successful mentoring of foreign students that results in their professional advancement in our discipline. I continue to teach at Chulalongkorn University every summer and the hope of finding other talented students is present in each of my classes. A number of my former students have gone on to graduate school and are now teaching psychology in Thailand and other countries. Enabling the dreams of others is certainly an important byproduct of what we do as professors and mentors. What better result can there be from a Fulbright experience!

Notes

1. Svare, B. A Status Report on the Development of Psychology in Thailand: Progress, Challenges and a Role for ASEAN. *International Psychology Bulletin*, 2019, 24, 11-23.
2. Svare, B. Assessing Psychology in Thailand, *International Psychology Bulletin*, 2011, 15 (2), 21-27.

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**Figure Caption:** Dr Svare with a group of behavioral neuroscience graduate students at Chiang Mai University in Chiang Mai, Thailand