

FULBRIGHT AND SUSTAINABILITY: FIVE ACTIONS FOR THE PLANET

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ABSTRACT

In the era of climate change, this commentary discusses actions that Fulbright staff and participants can take to enhance sustainability. The five actions include choosing greener travel, designing pro-environment orientations, including climate action in service, teaching and learning about sustainability, and sustaining relationships online. Through these sustainable actions, Fulbright can be a leader in sustainability in the same way it is seen as a leader in exchange and diplomacy.

Keywords: international exchange • sustainability • climate change



INTRODUCTION

Senator J. William Fulbright believed that the exchange of leaders and scholars would reduce war and build global peace. Yet the geopolitical and environmental landscape has changed dramatically since the Fulbright Act was signed in 1946. Today we are faced with global climate change, which according to a recent statement by United Nations expert Dr. Ian Fry, “is the largest, most pervasive threat to the natural environment and societies the world has ever experienced.” Climate change has disrupted society, industry, and education and affected every living being on the planet. Importantly, climate change leads to conflict, forced migration, destruction, and nationalism – all challenges that Senator Fulbright aimed to combat with the Fulbright Program.

In this context, we began wondering: How is Fulbright responding to climate change? Our ideas come from several sources, motivated by our interest in social justice and international education. The first is climate justice education, which focuses on peoples’ experiences with climate change and human rights. According to researcher Sarah Riggs Stapleton, by learning about the concrete outcomes of climate change, we can change our behaviors to reduce impact on the most marginalized. The second source is a growing movement to recognize the environmental impact of educational exchange. For instance, the Climate Action Network for International Educators (CANIE) has released an ambitious set of commitments for climate action in international education

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called the CANIE Accord. The third source is research on the thorny ethics of promoting international education – which is highly valued – but often necessitates carbon emissions. Recent research by one of the co-authors (Anne Campbell, with coauthors Nguyen and Stewart), demonstrates that these ethical concerns are held by both participants and administrators; in fact, administrators suggested less travel and advocated for more online and local exchanges.

With these concepts in mind, we offer five suggested actions for Fulbright program staff, partners, and grantees to consider. We understand that some of these recommendations are already happening. Our hope is to connect and move ideas forward in Fulbright headquarters and Commissions, in the classrooms where we teach, and in the conscience of Fulbrighters around the world. Links to additional reading are included at the conclusion.

SUSTAINABLE ACTION 1: CHOOSE GREENER TRAVEL

As recipients of US Government funding, Fulbrighters must adhere to the Fly America Act (FAA). It states that travelers whose travel is paid for by the federal government are required to use a “US flag” air carrier service. The policy is seemingly about American tax money going to support US companies and ensuring that carriers comply with US laws and regulations. However, it may be unintentionally increasing greenhouse gasses. By prioritizing US carriers over others, Fulbrighters may be forced to take more short, connecting flights, thereby increasing their carbon outlay.

For example, if a Fulbrighter is going from San Francisco to Edinburgh, they can choose three different options: an FAA-compliant flight on United Airlines; a non-FAA-compliant flight on British Airways; or a mix of flying and taking a train. Based on data from Google Flights (accessed October 19, 2022), the FAA-compliant United route emits 42% more carbon than a British Airways flight. It is \$116 less expensive, but it is also 3.5 hours longer. However, choosing to take a direct United Airlines flight from San Francisco to London and a train from London to Edinburgh, a Fulbrighter would spend about the same amount of time and cost as the first United flight. But this unconventional route saves about 318 kg of CO₂ per traveler. If similar CO₂ savings were possible for each of the 8,000 Fulbrighters, the Fulbright program could reduce a whopping 2.5 million kg outlay annually.

SUSTAINABLE ACTION 2: DESIGN PRO-ENVIRONMENT ORIENTATIONS

Building on lessons of the pandemic, the Fulbright Program has identified ways to create sustainable and inclusive opportunities worldwide. Examples include holding online orientations, sharing green packing lists, and having low-impact in-country orientations with little swag, paper, and plastic waste. Welcome orientations also could include information about the environmental

situation in the country, advise Fulbrighters on local environmental efforts, and address current climate-related social justice issues in local communities. For example, in Kosovo where one of the co-authors (Anne Campbell) currently lives, there is considerable information about the anticipated rolling blackouts due to the European energy crisis, but there is little discussion about ways to recycle information about how to mitigate the impact of persistent poor air quality.

SUSTAINABLE ACTION 3: INCLUDING CLIMATE ACTION IN SERVICE

During co-author Tremaine Smith's time in Sri Lanka, he participated in beach cleanups and community projects to promote environmentalism. Granted, for more Fulbrighters to be involved in such initiatives, Fulbright Commissions and staff may need to identify local initiatives and further emphasize environmental justice. This could also include having conversations with Fulbrighters, connecting them with local activists and changemakers who understand the relationship between climate and education, design service projects that align with the Sustainable Development Goals and national environmental plans. Having more of these opportunities would benefit Fulbright by demonstrating that those selected for the program truly are leaders in their fields and communities through the ways they give back to their host communities. It may also benefit Fulbrighters in developing their intercultural competence skills as they work on local initiatives and build partnerships.

SUSTAINABLE ACTION 4: TEACHING AND LEARNING ABOUT SUSTAINABILITY

Teachers the world over can prepare their students to question and challenge the status quo. Fulbright English Teaching Assistants (ETAs) take on this task in a new culture, and they should connect with local educators to discuss and learn about important social issues such as climate change, sustainability, and environmental justice. These topics can be embedded in their lesson plans, taught through experiential learning in the field, or explored through different school projects. A Fulbright video series dedicated to teaching sustainability in classrooms, could lead to improved environmental justice lesson plans shared across countries. Moreover, Fulbrighters are far reaching in their interests, so local or international environmental topics could be included in commission hosted talks.

SUSTAINABLE ACTION 5: SUSTAINING RELATIONSHIPS ONLINE AND THROUGH ALUMNI NETWORKS

Keeping relationships vibrant via Zoom and other online platforms, or through alumni networks, can increase the depth and length of partnerships after the Fulbrighter returns home. Some alumni groups are working on environmental and sustainability projects—such as encouraging sustainable investments. There are also multiple possibilities to expand Fulbright via Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL). By further engaging students and scholars online, Fulbright can use COIL to enhance teaching and continue thought-provoking discussions. The pandemic demonstrated that people can successfully engage online if there is quality content and reliable technology. Building on this momentum, Fulbright can continue to promote and host online meetings and forums across countries and within alumni networks.

It takes significant planning, ongoing communication, and considerable effort to establish and maintain mutually-beneficial, international relationships. This commentary intends to share five concrete actions for the Fulbright program. Fulbright is a leader in educational exchange and diplomacy. Through these actions, Fulbright can also be a leader in sustainability.

NOTES

1. The CANIE Accord. (n.d.) Climate Action Network for International Educators. <https://canie.org/the-canie-accord>
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BIOGRAPHY

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