

# THE IMPACT OF THE FULBRIGHT EXPERIENCE ON A COMMUNITY COLLEGE EDUCATOR: TWENTY YEARS LATER

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## ABSTRACT

The author shares his experiences in navigating the Fulbright US Scholar Program process and the impact that the experience had on his family and himself. Coming from a community college, he represents a minority of grantees, even though community colleges educate over 40% of US undergraduates. He shares how the experience impacted his career choices, provided him with an opportunity to support global education in community colleges, and brought his passion for advancing peacebuilding to fruition.

**Keywords:** community college • peacebuilding • global education



## COMING TO THE FULBRIGHT PROGRAM

In 2002, I had been teaching full-time at Harford Community College in northeast Maryland for nearly eight years. Community colleges, sometimes called junior colleges, play a significant role in American higher education. While universities and liberal arts colleges focus on matriculating students to bachelor's degrees, community colleges offer associate degrees and other work-related credentials. They provide students, who are less interested in traditional liberal arts areas, with opportunities to build skill sets that allow them immediate employment. In addition, they are less expensive and generally have few admission criteria except graduation from high school. For these reasons, these institutions are often referred to as “democracy's colleges.”

One typical community college discipline is paralegal studies, where students are trained to work as assistants to lawyers. I used to direct such a program. Teaching was my passion but not my first career. After law school, I practiced law for several years, which was meaningful, but it did not compare to my love of the classroom. Therefore, I started teaching part-time and eventually made it a full-time career.

My second passion was peace. As an attorney, I had been trained in mediation and conflict resolution and incorporated these into the work. Because my practice included family issues such as divorce and custody, mediation was necessary for peaceful approaches to domestic conflict. For example, sitting down with a skilled and empathic mediator was better than battling it out in court over the custody of children.

At my college, I developed conflict-focused courses for the local community and students. At the time, very few community college professors were teaching conflict resolution, a part of the growing field of peacebuilding. Though these courses provided me with new opportunities with students, I felt that I was not reaching my full potential. The colleagues were smart, supportive, and dedicated to their work. However, intercultural and global education – a cornerstone of peacebuilding work – was not easily supported in the county I was working, which was overwhelmingly white, politically conservative, and parochial.

My wife and I come from global roots. My mother is French Canadian. She had immigrated to the US and married my father, a native Baltimorean of mostly English and Irish descent. My wife's parents are more diverse. Her father came from India on a Guggenheim Fellowship in the early 1960s to advance his dental education, and her mother's family immigrated from Germany to New York City in the 1950s. Both families represent global, progressive, and intercultural values that we want to pass on to our biological son and adopted Korean daughter. We believed that living abroad would be the goal and that my career would be the means to bring this about.

I spent time online looking at many exchange programs, none of which seemed to fit my situation until my father-in-law recommended the Fulbright Program. After some research, I recognized that few community college faculty received Fulbright awards. At about the same time, I learned about an exchange program between the Maryland National Guard and the Estonian government. Not being Estonian or knowing any Estonians, it seemed to have little relevance to my plans. Nevertheless, a colleague had participated in the program and spoke positively of his experience. Nothing prevented me from applying for a grant to give a few lectures in Estonia and help strengthen its ties with Maryland. As an attorney, I suggested in my application that I could discuss the US legal system and share my work in conflict, which was no stranger to this Baltic nation that had left the Soviet Union a decade ago. I was accepted into the program. Indeed, my goals in visiting Estonia were not only to achieve this specific grant's ends, but to see if I could obtain an invitation for a Fulbright award, which would be helpful in an application. Moreover, it would be a good move to visit the country to allay our reservations about living there with our children, including concerns about schooling.

The grant took me to the University of Tartu, in Estonia's second-largest city. Tartu is the country's academic heart and, some would say, its cultural center, in that the capital Tallinn is thought of as more Russian than Estonian in many ways. I was introduced to faculty in the political science program and law school. I made a pitch to teach a course in alternative dispute resolution in law school, and peace studies: an interdisciplinary field looking at the causes of conflict and violence and approaches to solutions to undergraduates. Both efforts resulted in letters of invitation to include in my Fulbright application. I also discussed my work with faculty and students and strengthened links with Maryland and my college.

The process of putting together the application for the Fulbright US Scholar Program was time consuming, with course proposals, personal and professional endorsements, ideas on how to advance my experiences upon return, and letters of recommendation. I was grateful to obtain strong recommendations, especially from one colleague who had been a mentor and is still a close friend. Finally, I submitted the application in the summer 2002, and the waiting game began.

In April 2003, I received the letter of award. Though my wife and I had theoretically considered how we might plan, now it was for real. We had much to do. Unfortunately, my college became an obstacle as the administration was unfamiliar with the Fulbright award. I had applied for a sabbatical, but it had yet to be approved. I had a Fulbright grant, but with no sabbatical salary. We could not afford to accept the award as the Fulbright stipend was insufficient in itself. The academic vice president opposed my sabbatical application. Looking back, the reason had less to do with me than campus politics. However, things worked out in the end. My colleagues went to bat for me, as did members of our college board of trustees, and with the final decision resting with the college president, I was hoping for the best. Though I had disagreements with the president— especially when I served as the faculty chair — she recognized the value of international education and overruled the academic vice president. My Fulbright grant and sabbatical would be for fall 2003 and I would return to the college in spring 2004. In the meantime, adjuncts could cover my teaching obligations. Our planning now centered on moving to Estonia.

## **ESTONIA**

During my first Estonia visit, I met with officials at a newly founded international school in Tartu, which reassured me that our children's education would be in good hands. Further planning followed, like housing (we assumed a lease from a previous Fulbright grantee), identifying the classes I would teach, and tackling the complexities of living abroad for six months. We decided to fly to Paris in July and drive to Estonia, passing through northern Europe and Scandinavia. It was an excellent adventure for all of us, including a visit to Legoland in Denmark and taking several ferries. Having not traveled

to northern Europe before, the experience gave me a better appreciation of cultural differences that contrasted with my own. For example, learning about the reserved approach to individual engagement, which is more common in Nordic countries, helped me when I first met Estonians, who are quintessentially reticent.

Living in Estonia was a seminal experience for us as a family. Our son, nine at the time, lived in a city where he was free to roam, explore, and make friends. Our daughter, four, went to a kindergarten where she learned more Estonian than the rest of us. My wife, a registered nurse, gave a lecture on American nursing practices, spent time with new friends, and managed our children's activities. Community college faculty often teach five three-credit courses per semester. However, during my Fulbright grant, I taught only two classes: one in the political science department on peace studies and one in law school on conflict resolution. Not having a heavy workload enabled me to write more and give additional lectures, including one at Uppsala University in Sweden.

My Fulbright experience coincided with a critical period in Estonia. A referendum took place to decide whether Estonia should join the European Union (EU) and the majority voted in favor of joining. Posters in support argued that Estonians should vote "jah" (yes) to bring about more prosperity. Those arguing for "ei" (no) implied that Estonia would be again taken over by outsiders (alluding to the Nazi and Soviet occupations). My students were excited about the prospects of being part of a new Europe and having the chance to look west rather than east for their futures. I wrote an op-ed in the *International Herald Tribune* commenting on my students' reactions to joining the European Union.

## TEACHING

My students were remarkably proficient in English. I taught both courses in English. Few Estonian speaking students learned Russian, unlike their parents, who had been forced to do it (I was struck by the fact that Estonian and Russian speaking students often communicated to each other in English). It was all about being European for them. I also had students in the Erasmus program hailing from European countries and showing their local peers the excitement of future possibilities. Just the same, Estonians have continued to be fearful of Russian intentions. Considering the current war in Ukraine and threats to the Baltic countries, few can argue they are wrong.

I recall that students in both classes were eager to engage with Americans, particularly in the post-9/11 world. In March 2003, the US invaded Iraq on the pretext that there were weapons of mass destruction in the country. When I was in Tartu, many people, both in the US and internationally, were questioning the justification for the invasion. My students – especially those participating in the Erasmus exchange program – were politically astute and

not afraid to question what was happening. I was the only American they knew. As such, class conversations often ventured into American foreign and military policy issues. Though I had objections to the invasion, I sometimes felt I needed to defend American policy. I wonder if this is a phenomenon that many Fulbright grantees feel overseas: they are there to learn about the host country but also to advance American interests. Many grantees might find this latter goal a bit reprehensible, but the reality is that the Fulbright Program (funded by the US government) is a tool of soft diplomacy. With my students, it was often difficult to negotiate these discussions, trying to share American national interests while voicing my reservations. It was an uncomfortable place to be. However, it was indeed an appropriate discussion in a peace studies class.

My alternative dispute resolution class consisted of native Estonian and native Russian speakers. It is important to remember that Estonia has a sizable Russian speaking minority estimated at about 25%. Because of the nature of the subject matter, this class was designed as experiential based. That is, we spent much of class engaged in role-plays. Not knowing much about Estonian society before arriving, I had designed exercises based on common American situations. It proved instructive both to me and my students at times. For instance, one exercise was about contacting law enforcement due to a neighbor's loud noise. This would be something that would naturally happen in the US. However, my students pointed out that Estonians would not do that, and they would suffer in silence before calling the police. They shared that such behavior was inherited from the Soviet period when calling the police might make you a target of others: a snitch, if you will, and possibly result in unfortunate personal consequences. During the height of the Soviet era, one did not know whom to trust.

I was also struck by the lack of trust between Estonian and Russian speaking students. The Russians felt that they were marginalized in society and denied opportunities in government, business, and education. They felt Estonians were, at times, holding grudges against them. An example was the existence of "occupation museums" in the Baltics, which depicted the horrors of Soviet oppression of native populations. The Russian speaking students believed they were unfairly blamed for past actions.

### **PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL IMPACT**

Senator J. William Fulbright argued that a primary benefit of the Fulbright Program would be enhancing peaceful relations between countries. It was not lost on me that I was teaching specifically about promoting peace and advancing conflict resolution, and as such, hopefully offering skills and knowledge to students as they navigated between competitive geopolitical forces. The Fulbright experience in Estonia further confirmed my desire to advance peacebuilding, leading me to continue to teach and write on the subject.

Upon my return, I hoped to continue advancing global education with colleagues, students, and the community. I offered lectures on my experience and made some course changes. Providing a tutorial on Estonia and its history was valuable for the students with little global orientation. I was full of ideas on developing new courses, a global curriculum, and creating study abroad opportunities. I needed the administration's support to accomplish these goals, but this help did not materialize. The campus climate at the time was very divisive. I was frustrated and, after about a year, I determined that I should be elsewhere. It was a difficult decision because I had received tenure, served in faculty leadership, and made close friends there. A colleague told me that I had now acquired the "brass ring" and should have enjoyed the protection. However, I was not sure that this ring was what I now needed.

I found a position at the US Institute of Peace (USIP) – a federally supported think tank that advances global conflict resolution efforts – that seemed to fit my qualifications (a few years earlier, I had participated in a program at the Institute). The position was a reach, though: I was not globally or DC connected and did not have a prestigious academic pedigree. Yet, the Fulbright award set me apart. Estonia experience had given me a broader and culturally infused notion of conflict and peacebuilding, something that was valued at USIP. I applied in early 2005 and, like all government jobs, the process was long, with several interviews. I was not hopeful, and became anxious about my career as the end of the academic year approached. On June 14, the day before my academic contract would expire, I was offered the position. I resigned from my college the next day. To say that my colleagues were shocked could be an understatement.

I left USIP in late 2012 and have since pursued my interests. In 2015, I formed a not-for-profit focusing on humanitarian education training for graduate students. This work has given me considerable satisfaction. Recognizing that many young people seek careers pursuing the greater good, I wrote a book (2016) for youth on careers in peacebuilding, which followed an earlier one on peacebuilding in community colleges. I also have collaborated with community colleges through an annual seminar on peacebuilding for educators, published widely on advancing global education in community colleges, served as president of the Washington, DC chapter of the Fulbright Association, and taught graduate level courses at George Mason University, Drexel University, and American University. I believe my Fulbright award made all of this possible.

### **IMPACT ON MY FAMILY**

Fulbright's impact on my family has been great. We moved to the Washington, DC area in 2005. In the ensuing years, my children developed a keen global perspective with diverse and international friends, and we continued to travel globally as a family. Our son worked in China for a summer and studied in Turkey for a semester while he was in college. Following

graduation, he served as a US Peace Corps volunteer in Namibia, teaching mathematics to middle school students. He has traveled the world and now works for the Environmental Protection Agency. Our daughter studied in Korea, her birth country, during her college years. She has also been a world traveler and embraced global values – now a second-grade teacher. My wife continued working as a nurse. Having fallen in love with the classroom atmosphere, like me, she is now teaching nursing full-time at Montgomery College, a community college in Maryland. She is a strong proponent of global education and has taken her nursing students to the Dominican Republic on a study trip. I would like to think their time in Estonia influenced my children's and wife's choices.

For me the impact of participating in the Fulbright Program was immeasurable. First, the Fulbright Program offered me a chance to broaden my thinking and consider the possibilities of the good I could do in the world. As a community college professor, I had the opportunity to bring global insight to my students and advance community colleges' important roles in cultural and global awareness. Finally, it allowed me to actualize working for peace. After twenty years, I am grateful for these opportunities. It has made me the person I am today.

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## NOTES

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Arrival in Tartu, Estonia, in August 2003 at Tartu International School

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**BIOGRAPHY**

David J. Smith was a Fulbright US Scholar at the University of Tartu (Estonia). He is a career coach and the president of the Forage Center for Peacebuilding and Humanitarian Education. David teaches as adjunct faculty at the Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter School for Peace and Conflict Resolution at George Mason University and the School of International Service at American University. He is the past president of the NCAC Chapter of the Fulbright Association, and lives in Rockville, Maryland, US. He can be reached at [davidjsmith@davidjsmithconsulting.com](mailto:davidjsmith@davidjsmithconsulting.com)

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