

RECRUITING FOREIGN SCHOLARS VIA THE FULBRIGHT PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT

As a three-time Fulbrighter, I narrate my experiences of bringing students from my overseas host institutions to my home state of Arkansas, and how this has built lasting international collaborations in keeping with the Arkansas senator's vision.

Keywords: Recruiting • outreach • graduate programs • international collaborations



UNLIKELY BEGINNINGS

I met him in a café in a bustling railway station in India. Over samosas and sweet milky tea, he said he was finishing his master's degree. "My passion is to go to America for biotechnology and become a scientist", he said in a hesitant mixture of Tamil and English. "But I have no money and I need guidance". "I'd be happy to help you", I said. "Just work with me step by step, and I will help you find a biomedical lab with full financial support in my state of Arkansas".

It was the year 2007. I was a US Fulbright Scholar in India, experiencing the rewards of the first of three Fulbright awards to various countries. Senator J. William Fulbright, a United States Senator from Arkansas, is a household name in Arkansas academic circles. I graduated from the college named after him in my alma mater, the University of Arkansas. I was inspired to apply for the Fulbright program by my professor, a veteran of three awards himself.

My host institution, G. B. Pant University of Agriculture and Technology was nestled in the foot of the Himalayas. The university focused on agriculture education. There was little awareness of biodiversity, conservation, and sustainable farming, in this rural area. The field was therefore ripe for me to promote awareness. I taught wildlife and climate-oriented classes. For students who wanted a "lighter fare", I even led a birdwatching class under the auspices of their continuing education program. That class mushroomed into a nature club. Over a decade later, via multiple return visits and donations of binoculars and field notebooks, I help keep that club alive.

ONE-ON-ONE MENTORING

In keeping with the Fulbright spirit of promoting international understanding, I went beyond my required teaching assignments and worked one-on-one with five students I “hand-picked” in my host institution, based on their track record, motivation to excel, and basic English skills. I helped them draft inquiry letters to American faculty; prepare for the GRE and TOEFL exams; navigate through the tortuous application process; and even prepare for their dreaded visa interviews. Decades ago, I was in their stage, yearning to cross the seas for my higher education, but like a rudderless ship without help. I rendered the assistance that I craved for and missed.

Back in Arkansas, I spoke to faculty colleagues about each of the students’ strengths and weaknesses and their interests. I lubricated the application process by matching the applicants with their mentors. For the professors, the fact that a colleague has already vetted the students was a reassurance that they were not committing to an unknown student on the other side of the world. The biology graduate program in Arkansas strives to maintain a high degree of diversity by attracting applicants from all over the world. All foreign students are supported by a generous package of assistantships or fellowships, with a full tuition waiver.

The five students I mentored in my Indian host institution came to the University of Arkansas with full financial support. All have finished their doctoral degrees and have successfully established careers in Canada and the United States. Two have junior teaching positions in colleges and the others are employed by biotechnology firms working on cutting-edge areas of biomedical research, from gene editing to vaccine development.

PANDEMIC OPENS UP OPPORTUNITIES

The Covid-19 pandemic helped me intensify my recruitment of foreign students to Arkansas. Lockdowns and travel disruptions left me stranded for 13 months in Sri Lanka, where I had gone for my third Fulbright award. For the first time in its storied history, Fulbright programs were suspended worldwide. I spent much of that time reaching out to and assisting local students from the University of Ruhuna and elsewhere. All six students have secured fully funded PhD programs in Arkansas. A few more are in the pipeline. Students from outside my host institution also contacted me for assistance. The pandemic forced many US institutions to drop the GRE requirement, an impediment for many foreign students whose native language is not English. Some of my Sri Lankan recruits are here because of that waiver.

With a massive debt crisis spawned in part by the pandemic, some Sri Lankan students could not pay their application fee because of tightened currency controls. I had to find creative ways around this, to have their applications accepted. For example, I had them send local currency to cause I support in Sri Lanka and then paid their fees in US dollars here.

A STATUE THAT STANDS TALL

Last year was the 75th anniversary of the Fulbright Program. The venerable senator's statue on the University of Arkansas campus is now mired in controversy in the wake of George Floyd's death. Some say it must be removed because the senator voted against the Civil Rights Act of 1963. I tell them that it's best to view the senator from the totality of his life's accomplishments, rather than one single act, so to speak. I point out the dozen foreign students I helped bring to America, whose lives were changed drastically for the better, and who in turn have academically and culturally enriched our small rural state. Most of them were women who may not have advanced in the STEM fields if the Fulbright program hadn't sent me to their campuses. In fact, one of the first acts a female Sri Lankan student did upon arrival on campus was to visit the statue and mutter a word of thanks to the senator.

Fast forward 15 years. That shy and soft-spoken lad I met over tea in the noisy railway station is now a scientist in Washington D.C. With pride, I track his progression as a scientist. He is a prolific writer with an impressive scientific publication record. In affiliation with US military scientists, he recently wrote on the effect of tourniquets on mitochondrial function of lower limb tissues. His other works span the gamut from renal failure in mouse models to femoral head necrosis in broiler chickens. Not bad for a young man from rural and humble beginnings. He gratefully acknowledges my role in his life and has been in touch. He married and brought his wife to America and helped her pursue her own dream of getting a graduate degree here.

Over the years, I have worked with other institutions in the Indian subcontinent. I have assisted more students to achieve their dreams of coming to Arkansas and other states for graduate study. I even brought a junior faculty member and her family for a semester from Pant University to my institution under the Fulbright Scholar-in-Residence program (2009).

FUTURE OUTLOOK

With the declining enrollment of American graduate students, US graduate programs are increasingly reliant on foreign students to maintain their competitive edge, especially in the STEM fields. I encourage other Fulbrighters to do similar recruitment activities. Reaching out to remote corners of the globe and changing lives and careers for the better is deeply fulfilling. I intend to continue recruiting abroad virtually and in person whenever possible. I have shifted focus in recent years to South America. Unfortunately, I have been rejected two years in a row for a Fulbright award to Ecuador, after clearing the peer-review stage both years.

Hopefully, I will have the honor of shaping more young scientists' trajectories via the Fulbright program. Bringing these young scholars from abroad has been beyond just a service to science, my alma mater, state, and country.

When Covid-19 canceled the 2020 cycle, I and a few others affected appealed to the Fulbright Foreign Scholarship Board (FFSB) to consider easing the competitive reapplication process for that year's program participants. Other federal programs (like NOAA's Teacher-at-Sea) deferred awards or made similar accommodations to affected awardees to enable them to finish their interrupted or canceled programs, but not the Fulbright (which gave us "reapplication privileges"). I humbly urge the FFSB to revisit its COVID-year grantees policy so that we can finish what we started or missed. Hopefully, I will have the honor of shaping more young scientists' trajectories via the Fulbright program. Bringing these young scholars from abroad has been beyond just a service to science, my alma mater, state, and country. I consider it a legacy of, and a fitting tribute to, that visionary senator from Arkansas.

BIOGRAPHY

Ragupathy Kannan is a professor of biology at the University of Arkansas in Fort Smith. He holds a PhD from the University of Arkansas. He has had three Fulbright awards; two to India (2007) and Sri Lanka (2020), and a Fulbright Specialist award to India (2019). He travels and lectures widely on climate change. His writings have appeared in prestigious journals like *Science* and *National Geographic*. For more on his recruitment efforts, see *Alumnus Kannan Sells Students from India and Sri Lanka on U of A* published in *Arkansas*, the magazine of the Arkansas Alumni Association, Spring 2022, page 20. E-mail: ragupathy.kannan@uafs.edu
