

CAN THE FULBRIGHT PROGRAM PLAY A ROLE IN HELPING HIGHER EDUCATION FIND NEW VALUE AND PURPOSE?

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From time to time, a book comes along that changes your thinking on a particular topic and provides a roadmap for solving a vexing societal problem. Such is the case with *Whatever it is, I'm Against it: Resistance to Change in Higher Education*. The title derives from a well-known song in a classic Marx Brothers film, aptly titled *Horse Feathers*. This book by the former long-time president at Macalester College, Brian Rosenberg, is a refreshing take on the difficulty in affecting lasting change addressing the most difficult issues confronting higher education today.

Young Americans and their parents are increasingly questioning the value of a college education in light of its escalating costs and questionable payoff in career opportunity and compensation. To further complicate the higher education landscape, there is a demographic cliff, meaning there are a fast diminishing number of college-age students and that this pattern will continue to decline another 20% until the year 2035. The result is that tuition-driven colleges and universities are showing dramatic enrollment declines putting many of them in financial peril; this is especially true at smaller colleges and regional universities. *Inside Higher Education* reports recently that in the US 15 institutions of higher learning shuttered their doors just this past year with many more expected to close in the years ahead.

This existential challenge to higher education institutions is not unique to the US. Other countries are experiencing their own crises in terms of declining enrollments and deteriorating finances given the rising cost of college education and increased skepticism about the value and purpose of higher education. Thailand and South Korea are just two examples where declining college-age student populations are forcing the consolidation of overbuilt and under-resourced university systems.

So, what is Rosenberg's solution for this and what does it have to do with the Fulbright program? His answer--easy to recommend and extremely difficult to execute--is to totally reimagine higher education and shed many of the prevailing ideas about its organization, culture, and purpose. Rosenberg suggests starting anew while avoiding replicating the Western higher education prototype. He provides a few compelling examples, among them are the African Leadership University (ALU) and Sterling College in Vermont. Rosenberg briefly mentions other examples of dramatic innovation

that have radically reworked the higher education model like Arizona State and Southern New Hampshire University. These universities are, however, at such large scale (hundreds of thousands of students each) that they are difficult to easily and quickly emulate.

The ALU model puts students (not faculty) at the center of their learning. It is inclusive instead of elitist, does away with majors and instead focuses on experiential learning, promotes building upon existing strengths, and utilizes both face-to-face and online learning strategies. The mission of ALU is to educate entrepreneurial leaders who will solve the pressing problems that plague a particular geographic area. ALU is about moving away from content specialties and being all things to all people. Rather, it emphasizes affordability, innovative critical thinking, ethical decision making, and working with others to problem-solve and creatively devise solutions.

Sterling College, which became a college some four decades ago, is a contrasting example of innovation through narrowing the institution's focus to one subject, the environment, and explicitly, consistently, and systemically linking theory to practice, turning ideas to actions. Both of these are relatively modest efforts. They do, however, suggest that change is possible. They require vision, resources, as well as the leadership with the courage and commitment to change. Fulbrighters could play an invaluable role in supporting higher educational leaders who want to implement innovative change.

Change will not be easy because of the prevailing model of faculty-dominated resource-intensive institutions trying to be everything to everybody. The ALU and Sterling College approach is a refreshing departure from the current emphasis of many colleges and universities to simply stay in business with little thought to either affordability or the mission of serving the public by helping to solve long standing societal problems. That older model of higher education, one that relies upon increasing enrollments (and tuition dollars) to balance the books as well as providing an endless array of majors to attract students, is no longer sustainable. These are tactics that are currently used by nearly every college and university today but are doomed to eventually fail for many except elite institutions with their deep endowments and large tuition revenues.

Places like ALU and Sterling College exemplify a more meaningful way of educating our young people. If scaled up to a point where they are serving many more individuals and their approach is replicated by other institutions, this could be a game-changer, especially in areas of the world where populations are increasing dramatically but educational opportunities are limited and expensive.

The core of many Fulbright experiences is resourceful innovation, generally related to higher education. For any future Fulbrighters, we advise them to apply for a fellowship where they could be on the frontlines of what is happening at places like ALU, Sterling, or other innovative higher educational institutions. Then, bring that knowledge and those experiences back to their

home institutions for implementation. We believe that even a small number of Fulbrighters could play an important role in promoting innovation that revitalizes the value and purpose of higher education.

We are very pleased that we are closing out our second publishing year of *Fulbright Chronicles* with another stellar group of articles. Shepard Forman writes movingly about how serendipity and opportunism enabled him to take a very different path while on a Fulbright in Brazil. Daniel Kelin's Fulbright work in India helped him to devise a drama-based program to help his own students in Hawaii better appreciate their cultural heritage. Iris Happo, a Fulbrighter from Finland, compared the early childhood education of her home country with the US. She makes recommendations on how each country could stand to benefit from the perceived strengths of their counterparts. Fulbrighter Alicia Sianes-Bautista from Spain compared the strengths and weaknesses of teaching internships between her home and host institution in Minnesota. Melinda Heinz, a Fulbrighter from the US, studied how Irish Men's Sheds (social clubs) impacted the well-being of older men. Romanian Fulbrighter Adina Ionescu explored new classroom tactics that can be used to teach students about sustainability. Her work culminated in a national newsletter that was created to teach others about these methods. Finally, Alex Woodman, a Fulbright research scholar at the School of Medicine, AGU (Bahrain), reports on how those with disabilities in this country are treated so inclusively and how policies they have adopted can produce transformational changes in those who have some form of disability.

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In this issue, we are introducing a new feature: an in-depth interview of a Fulbright alumnus. We are pleased to publish the first interview with Femi Mimiko, a distinguished Nigerian educator, whose work in higher education and development is well known. Conducted by two members of our editorial team, JohnBosco Chika Chukwuorji and Habiba Atta, it reveals how Femi Mimiko's Fulbright experience at the US Military Academy at West Point enhanced his understanding about the importance of understanding others and shaped his career in important ways.

Looking back over this past year, *Fulbright Chronicles* published 30 articles and commentaries with 18 (60%) of those papers authored by US alumni and 12 (40%) by foreign alumni. We also published 16 book reviews with 10 (60%) being US alumni authors of books and 6 (40%) being foreign alumni. For our book reviewers, 9 (56%) were from the US and 7 (44%) were foreign. These numbers reflect important progress in our desire to be as global in our reach as the Fulbright program is.

Please enjoy this issue of *Fulbright Chronicles* and consider submitting an article in the future. Please also let us know whether you are aware of higher education institutions that are innovating to enhance their value and purpose and where Fulbrighters are contributing to these changes. If there is

community interest in this topic, we would consider it for a special issue. Our inaugural special issue on Sustainability, edited by Associate Editor Melanie Brooks, will be the *Chronicle's* first special issue and will kick off our third year in mid-April.

As always, we eagerly look forward to hearing from our global alumni family as we work together to shape the *Fulbright Chronicles* to be the best representative of the Fulbright program in all of its strengths and breadth.

We wish all of you a peaceful, prosperous, and healthy 2024!