

LEADING THE CHANGE: FULBRIGHT'S ROLE IN FOSTERING SUSTAINABILITY

EDWARD PRADOS AND TERHI MÖLSÄ



ABSTRACT

Fulbright Commissions worldwide can take a broader role in efforts to mitigate climate change. We propose reducing the carbon footprint of administrative operations, integrating sustainability into program design, and allocating strategic grant funding for sustainability research. We advocate for the global Fulbright Program to take a leadership role in advancing sustainability in international exchanges.

Keywords: climate change • sustainability • carbon neutrality • Fulbright program • international exchanges



Climate change is increasingly becoming a pressing global issue. Recent data indicates a high likelihood of exceeding the Paris Agreement's 1.5°C

warming limit. With each incremental increase in temperature, the impacts of climate change affect us all. Despite the significant benefits international changes offer in education, science, and cultural diplomacy, it is crucial to acknowledge the indisputable climate impact of international travel. This makes it imperative that the field of international education prioritizes sustainability in all aspects of program design and implementation to address and minimize negative climate impacts.

As Executive Director of the Fulbright Jordan Commission and Chief Executive Officer of the Fulbright Finland Foundation, we are of the opinion that Fulbright Commissions have the potential to contribute to sustainability in much more significant ways than they currently do. We believe that collectively, Commissions can take a leading role in promoting sustainability in international education and exchanges. Therefore, we propose that all stakeholders incorporate sustainability into program design and Commission practices.

RETHINKING INTERNAL COMMISSION PRACTICES

Embracing and implementing eco-friendly practices is crucial for all organizations. However, Commissions vary considerably. Yet, collectively, they can serve as a valuable resource for learning and offering examples of sustainable solutions that can be adapted appropriately to various contexts.

For example, the Jordan Fulbright Commission provides an illustrative example. The Commission is in the process of transitioning to solar power as the main source of electricity for office operations. Once implemented, we expect to recover the cost in less than three years. We will also reduce our administrative transportation budget by 90% through the purchase of an electric vehicle that will be charged via our own solar energy.

The Commission is also transitioning to cloud computing. While server farms consume energy, a dedicated on-site server is far less efficient compared to a cloud-based server. Additionally, opting for paper over online documents and forms contributes to the production process of paper produces, involving harvesting, milling, and transportation, which releases significant amounts of carbon into the atmosphere. By transitioning most of the Commission's systems online, Fulbright Jordan is not only decreasing its carbon footprint, it is saving thousands of dollars per year on supply and printing expenses.

Integrating sustainability into everyday practices involves raising awareness about ecosystems and emphasizing the importance of energy-efficient practices. For example, many Commissions adopt hybrid work policies. When staff members drive to work, incorporating a day or two of remote work not only reduces carbon emissions but also offers and appealing employee benefit.

Integrating sustainability into everyday practices involves raising awareness about ecosystems and emphasizing the importance of energy-efficient practices

SUSTAINABLE PROGRAM DESIGN

In-person intercultural exchange continues to be the cornerstone of the Fulbright Program. However, by thoughtfully integrating new [digital and hybrid opportunities](#), we can significantly add to, and enhance, these traditional activities. These innovations can extend the reach of experience and connections, while also amplifying the value, impact, and sustainability of programs. A concrete example is a comprehensive, hybrid pre-departure or reentry orientation training delivered through flipped classroom pedagogy along with the smart integration of blended learning models. Strategic assessment of the contents of the entire program lifecycle – the applicant-grantee-alumni continuum – informs the process of selecting optimal delivery methods for each content segment. The goal is to increase even further the value of all in-person experiences, simultaneously helping to eliminate any unnecessary travel, a win-win for both sustainability and the program itself.

Current grant programs, iterations, or cohorts can be strategically focused. However, integrating sustainability into program design can also offer components aimed at developing grantee competencies for green transitions, irrespective of their particular grant program. For instance, the Fulbright Finland Foundation collaborates with the [Finnish Innovation Fund SITRA](#) to provide hands-on workshops to US Fulbrighters to learn about Finnish

approaches to the circular economy, green lifestyles, and the role of active citizenship in sustainable development. In their evaluations of the workshops, the US student grantees noted that the workshops helped them identify concrete actions to mitigate climate change and fostered a sense of agency that turned anxiety into hope, rather than apathy.

CREATING STRATEGIC FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES

Fulbright Commissions can use funding strategically to promote and prioritize specific emphases in their award programs. Prioritizing research and/or professional projects in areas such as climate change, biodiversity, food security, clean energy, disaster resilience can catalyze collaborative research, cross-cultural innovation, social enterprises, and climate advocacy. Commissions can use funding to make long-term contributions to global sustainability initiatives. Fulbright Finland, for example, offers a strategic award program for researchers and professionals, the “Seeking Solutions for Global Challenges Award.” This award is broadly aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

STEERING THE FULBRIGHT COMMUNITY TOWARDS SUSTAINABILITY

The forty-nine binational Commissions across the world can choose their own practices and processes; however, a significant share of program administration lies outside of the Commissions’ influence – including the US Department of State and its cooperating agencies that support the administration of the global program. Streamlining Fulbright’s myriad systems and administrative practices to make them more sustainable is already a topic of discussion amongst the US State Department and the Commissions. These discussions should be broadened to include a focus on climate-related sustainability.

Sustainability demands both active discussion and tangible actions within the global Fulbright network. However, achieving a comprehensive understanding of sustainability also relies on cross-border, interorganizational learning. [The Climate Action Network for International Educators \(CANIE\)](#) exemplifies an initiative that brings together practitioners from around the world to catalyze action. Founded by volunteer grassroots initiative formed by international education practitioners, it offers a valuable public resource library on its website, featuring scalable ideas.

SUSTAINABILITY REQUIRES LEADERSHIP

Moving a global program towards greater sustainability requires leadership and significant organizational effort. There is no panacea. Many current climate mitigation measures have well-documented side effects. It is easy to argue that individual actions seem inconsequential compared to the magnitude of the crisis. Nevertheless, we should do everything we can to mitigate against such impacts. It is pertinent to increase our efforts in learning and have frank conversations about our individual and collective roles in leading the change we want to see. This can be achieved by adopting actions currently available along with continuously adapting our responses as new methods and solutions are discovered and developed.

The complex, multifaceted, and global climate crisis is a preeminent challenge for the international community. International exchanges cultivate leadership and empower individuals to use their creativity to solve challenging problems. This is exactly the kind of task for which we believe the Fulbright Program was designed – to create solutions, ignite action, and foster hope.

NOTES

1. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report states that unless there are immediate, rapid, and large-scale reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, limiting warming to close to 1.5°C or even 2°C, will be beyond reach. See, for example: [Climate change widespread, rapid, and intensifying – IPCC — IPCC](#)
2. For full information about the COP 28 conference and its results, navigate to the conference’s website: [UN Climate Change Conference - United Arab Emirates | UNFCCC](#)
3. For more information about the debate between electric cars and internal combustion engines, see: [Electric vs. Gas Cars: Which Is Better For The Environment? | EnergySage](#) or [Factcheck: How electric vehicles help to tackle climate change \(carbonbrief.org\)](#)
4. While there has been extensive emphasis on the carbon footprint of cloud computing, on-site data centers consume relatively larger amount of energy, see: [Cutting Down CO2 Emissions: What Is the Environmental Impact of Cloud Computing? \(relevant.software\)](#)
5. To explore the voluntary carbon market, including offsets, see: [2023 State of the Voluntary Carbon Markets Report: Paying for Quality - Ecosystem Marketplace](#)

BIOGRAPHY

Edward Prados is the Executive Director of Fulbright Jordan, and a Fulbright US Student alumnus to Yemen (1993-94). He can be reached at ed@fulbright.org.jo. Terhi Mölsä is the CEO of the Fulbright Finland Foundation, and she can be reached at terhi.molsa@fulbright.fi
