

An Examination of the Fulbright Program

International Educational Exchange from a National Security Perspective

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Key Facts

The Fulbright program:

- Is an international educational exchange program that sends American students, scholars, artists, and professionals overseas **and** brings foreign students, scholars, artists, and professionals to America to teach, study, and conduct research for a defined amount of time.
- Has been in existence since 1948 and has an alumni network of over 300,000.
- Operates in over 155 countries and supports the exchange of over 8,000 participants annually.
- Is under the purview of the U.S. Department of State.
- Emphasizes and encourages mutual understanding, cross-cultural understanding, and foreign language development, all of which have profound implications for American national security and public diplomacy.
- Could be improved by a number of measures ranging from more effective organization of alumni to greater accessibility within the United States and around the world.

"If you talk to a man in a language that he understands, that goes to his head. But if you talk to him in his own language, that goes to his heart."

—Nelson Mandela

Sixty-seven years ago, a freshman senator from Arkansas introduced a bill in the US Congress with this idea at its very core: to inspire and enable the kind of intellectual and cultural engagement with the world that would allow for many such conversations of the heart.

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This bill, signed into law by President Truman one year later, set into motion a visionary international educational exchange program that has since grown into one of the most successful, globally lauded foreign policy initiatives undertaken by the U.S. government.

The Fulbright Program, named after its sponsor Senator J. William Fulbright, is founded on the basic premise of increasing mutual understanding between people of the United States of America and people of other nations.²

As a project centered on facilitating the educational exchange of Americans to other countries and foreign nationals to America, the Fulbright Program seeks to expand and integrate global networks of knowledge production and cross-cultural awareness in the name of the international good.

Such a pursuit has also proven incredibly beneficial for American public diplomacy and national security. This paper seeks to approach and understand the Fulbright program—its history, the work that it does in the world, and its future—from this public diplomacy and national security perspective.

The Fulbright has grown from an initiative that began with eighty-three participants from four different countries in 1948 into an internationally renowned institution.²

It most recently boasted an exchange body of around 8,000 scholars and students from 155 countries in 2012.³ Evaluating its growth holistically, it becomes clear that there is much policy wisdom and political insight to be gained from the Fulbright program's successes and limitations.

Much of the work that it does in the world today is made possible by the philosophical and political foundations of the program's past.

This paper unpacks the Fulbright institution in an effort to understand what its successes in the realm of foreign relations have meant for American national security.

A Brief History

The Fulbright Program was born from legislation best known as the Fulbright Act, passed into law on August 1st, 1946 by President Harry Truman.⁴

Introduced to Congress as a direct response to the events of World War II, the Act authorized “the use of credits established abroad for the promotion of international good will through the exchange of students in fields of education, culture, and science.”⁵ To put it simply, the Act created a program of international educational exchange, sending American students overseas and welcoming foreign students to America.

The program was to be funded by proceeds from the sales of surplus war property at a time when there was a distinct need for the U.S. to make use of nonconvertible currencies. However, the Act took a few years to make the transition from law to actuality, as it required much bureaucratic maneuvering to arrange and establish the series of bi-national partnerships that have come to characterize the Fulbright Program.

An issue that quickly became prominent was a lack of funding in U.S. dollars to support the scholars' stateside costs.

Besides the enlisting of help from universities and corporations in the private sector, the passing of the 1948



Harry Truman signing the Fulbright Act

U.S. Information and Educational Exchange Act that enabled the Fulbright Program to get off the ground. Under this piece of landmark legislation, the Department of State was able to “seek appropriations to pay contractual costs and some dollar expenses of foreign grantees, as well as carry out exchanges in countries with minimal surplus property sales.”⁶

The first batch of Fulbright participants began their travels in 1948.⁷ At that time, partnerships had only been established with China, Burma, and the Philippines, so the Fulbright cohort was the smallest it has ever been in the program’s history: 47 Americans and 36 foreign nationals.⁸

Momentum picked up drastically, and by the next year the program was able to send 823 Americans abroad and bring 967 foreign nationals to America in an exchange that included many more European states such as France, Norway, Italy, the Netherlands, and Belgium.⁹

Over the next decade, the Fulbright program continued to expand at a substantial rate, incorporating more and more countries into its robust network of exchange.



J. William Fulbright

The practice of allowing countries to pay off their debts to the United States in unorthodox manners such as contributing to and participating in educational exchange programs also continued and became something of an institution.

With the passage of more landmark legislation in 1961— the Mutual Educational and Cultural Exchange Act, also known as the Fulbright-Hays Act— the program saw increased governmental and institutional support to expand its authority over educational matters at home and exchange projects abroad.

The Mutual Educational and Cultural Exchange Act not only widened the geographic purview of the Fulbright Scholarship Board to include over 100 new countries, but also “promoted modern foreign language and area studies schools and colleges in the United States.”¹⁰

Today the Fulbright Program operates in over 155 countries around the world and has a participant body of around 8000 scholars and students per year.¹¹

It is internationally recognized as an exchange program that brings together people from all walks of life and “is an important element of the United States’ bilateral relationships with countries around the world.”¹²

What is a Fulbright Scholarship?

The Fulbright Program operates on a number of different levels: it offers “competitive, merit-based grants” to a select number of students, scholars, teachers, and professionals—both American and International— to live, work, and/or study abroad for a defined amount of time.¹³

The exchanges are between the United States and other countries only. A student from South Africa would not be able to receive a Fulbright grant to study or research or work in Thailand, for example.

These grants are generally fully-funded and cover “roundtrip transportation to the host country, monthly maintenance for the length of the grant, full or partial tuition (if applicable), accident and sickness coverage, and the cost of mandatory Fulbright orientation and enrichment activities.”¹⁴

There are a number of different types of grants awarded including:

- study abroad
- graduate research abroad
- language teaching assistantships
- science and technology-focused awards
- public policy fellowships
- art and music projects

The goal of these grants remains what it was over 60 years ago: to enable individuals to learn from and interact with the world in a way that fosters mutual understanding and forges crucial cross-cultural relationships in an increasingly interdependent global environment.

Implications for National Security Strategy and Public Diplomacy

Considered one of the most “enlightened” foreign policy measures undertaken by the U.S. government, the Fulbright program has had positive reverberations resonate far beyond the world of academia.¹⁵

With over 300,000 alumni since the program’s inception, Fulbrighters have ascended to the highest echelons of government, scientific innovation, business, and art.

As the program’s website proudly announces:

“Forty three Fulbright alumni from 11 countries have been awarded the Nobel Prize, 28 alumni are MacArthur Foundation Fellows, and 81 alumni have received Pulitzer Prizes. Twenty nine Fulbright alumni have served as head of state or government.”¹⁶

These individuals have all benefited, in some way or another, from the insight and perspective gained during their sojourns outside of their home countries’ borders, engaging with foreign publics, exposing themselves to different languages and ways of life, and understanding their own national identities from another perspective.

Beyond the global advances brought about by Fulbrighters’ individual successes, the nature of the larger project of educational exchange is most profoundly significant in terms of American national security and public diplomacy. Two words at the core of the program’s mission say it all: “mutual understanding.”

Whether it be diplomatic negotiations, military strategy, or international arbitration, mutual understanding between peoples of different states is of utmost import in this particularly intertwined moment in international affairs.

The program’s distinctly educational emphasis must be noted here, as it is intended to be a *supplement* to United States foreign policy, implementing its general aims while not purporting to be an instrument of foreign policy in and of itself. As the Foreign Scholarship Board cautioned, “care should be taken to avoid all appearances of cultural imperialism.”¹⁷ The emphasis on the *exchange* aspect of the program works to this end.

An educational exchange provides the opportunity for states— on the organizing and funding end— and individuals— on an interpersonal level— to build cultural bridges and create a common, inclusive language for productive international discourse.

Cross-cultural Understanding

As Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs Tara Sonenshine remarked at an ASP event on June 28, 2012: “The challenge of public diplomacy is to explain America— its policies, practices, values, ideas, and ideals.”¹⁸

Fulbrighters, by virtue of their selection into the program, operate in foreign contexts as teachers and students, teaching about America and learning about the world. Excellence in academics does not solely govern the selection process. United States participants at levels of the Fulbright program are vetted based on their ability to represent a diverse portrait of America in all of these different respects.



Fulbright Specialist Mark Alter (center) enjoys a riverboat ride with colleagues in Vietnam

In a collaborative learning environment, participants have the opportunity to present American perspectives in a non-coercive manner that is in alignment with the fundamental principles of academic freedom. Because of the Fulbright Commission’s emphasis on integration within the host country, Fulbrighters also have the privilege of learning about the infrastructure and culture of the country in which they are stationed.

This is a double opportunity allowing for American engagement abroad and foreign national engagement in American society.

An integrated environment of this nature is conducive to the crucial political project of building cross-cultural understanding. Since most Fulbrighters go on to produce work— public policy, scientific development, art, etc. — on both the national and international stages, cross-cultural understanding has a ripple effect on the larger population.

As ASP policy analyst Matthew Wallin advocates in *The New Public Diplomacy Imperative*, “listening to foreign publics allows the United States to craft policy and messaging that better achieves strategic objectives.”¹⁹ Constructive listening is not possible without understanding, and as Wallin further develops in his paper, its presence has tangible effects on the success of American diplomatic and military endeavors in certain tense regions of the world.

Take Vietnam, for example. On July 10, 2012, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made some poignant remarks at the Foreign Trade University in Hanoi, Vietnam in honor of the Vietnam Fulbright program’s 20th anniversary. On addressing the crucial role the Fulbright program plays in “breaking down the walls of misunderstanding and mistrust,” she shared the following thoughts:

*“It is not that we will agree on everything, because no two people, let alone two nations, agree on everything, but that we will see each other as fellow human beings on a common journey, a journey that is filled with all of the possibilities that are available to people around the world... [What is most important are] the daily contacts between our people, so many Vietnamese and so many American people who get to know one another, who have a chance to work together or study together or even live together creating those bonds that really do bring us closer together.”*²⁰

American and Vietnamese relations have made incredible progress in the last few decades, given the tumultuous history between these nations.

To this end, Secretary Clinton largely applauded the Fulbright program and the mutual understanding it facilitates, saying:



“The Fulbright program has helped to deepen the ties between our nations and it has... literally transformed the lives of over 8,000 American and Vietnamese students, scholars, educators, and business people... this generation of students and scholars is well positioned to make great contributions to [the] future. And it won’t be just because of their education and their skill, it will be because of the relationship and perspective that they forge and bring home with them.”²¹

Language Development

The Council on Foreign relations released a report in March 2012 titled *U.S. Education Reform and National Security*. This report made some alarming discoveries:

- Only 1.4% of American students manage to study abroad.
- Although over four hundred languages are spoken in the United States, roughly eight out of ten American students only speak English.
- The U.S. State Department and intelligence agencies are facing critical language shortfalls in areas of strategic interest.²²

These three findings point to the success and necessity of the Fulbright program, but also tell of the work left to be done in the larger project of international educational exchange.

According to the report, foreign language proficiency is becoming increasingly important in today’s world.

While English may reign supreme as the language spoken the world over, speaking just one language does not adequately prepare an individual for the demands of America’s national security interests.

In a greater sense, “The United States is not producing enough foreign-language speakers to staff important posts in the U.S. Foreign Service, the intelligence community, and American companies.”²³

A Government Accountability Office report found that the State Department faces “foreign language shortfalls in areas of strategic interest.”²⁴

Programs like the Fulbright encourage multilingualism and American engagement in areas of interest where the need is great.

Example : Afghanistan

Afghanistan is interesting to examine as an example an area of strategic interest where the State Department is experiencing serious educational inadequacies.

The following provides a brief history of the U.S.-Afghanistan Fulbright program:

- The Fulbright relationship with Afghanistan lasted from 1952 to 1979.
- It sponsored over 105 American and 250 Afghan students.
- After 1979, the program was suspended for twenty-three years until 2003.
- Currently, no Fulbright Program opportunities exist for US citizens in Afghanistan.
- However, there are opportunities for Afghan students to come to the United States through the program.²⁵

While this one-sided exchange is better than none, evidence shows that American public diplomacy and national security strategy has suffered in its wake.

As *U.S. Education Reform* solemnly notes, “thirty-three of forty-five officers in [Afghanistan] in language-designated positions did not meet the State Department’s language requirements.”²⁶ This grave situation makes for a debilitating disconnect during times of war and transition, much like what Afghanistan and the United States are and have been going through in recent history.

Knowledge of a country’s language allows for a deeper understanding of that country’s culture and history, something that is indispensable in business, diplomatic, and military situations. “A failure to learn about global cultures has serious consequences,” as evidenced by a recent report by the U.S. Army Research Institute, which found that “cultural learning” and “cultural agility” are critical skills in the military.²⁷

As Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta wrote in an August 2011 memo:

*“Our forces must have the ability to effectively communicate with and understand the cultures of coalition forces, international partners, and local populations.”*²⁸

The Fulbright program in Afghanistan has the potential to ameliorate at least some aspects of this situation. Already, by giving Afghans the opportunity to come study in the United States, opportunities are being created for mending relations between the two nations on an interpersonal level.

For example, Abdullah and Shabnam, two engineers from Kabul University, came to the University of Missouri on Fulbright graduate grants.

Their experiences in Missouri are widening their horizons and equipping them with the knowledge they need to make a difference back in their home community: “the more Abdullah and Shabnam learn, the more they are convinced that they can help Afghanistan to succeed.

When they return to Afghanistan, one of their first plans is to start a branch of the Institute of Transportation Engineers to support safe and efficient traffic operations and other transportation-related services in Kabul.”²⁹

Ahmad Shoaib, another Afghan engineer who studied at Duke University through the Fulbright program, “sought to clear up misperceptions about life in Afghanistan” during his time in America.³⁰ For example, “he emphasized that despite the insurgency and the violence, there’s a burgeoning private sector, and that most Afghans are not so different from Americans.”³¹

The stories of these three individuals indicate that more attention should be given to the potential of the Fulbright Program—and international educational exchange in general—to create mutual understanding in nations where histories have been complicated and difficult.

The safety of Fulbright participants obviously comes first; and while the security situation in certain regions of the world is simply too unforgiving for an exchange to take place, more effort could be invested in educating Americans about the cultures of other countries.

Next Steps

The Fulbright program's activities over its 64 year history symbolize the power of exchange diplomacy to bolster the aims of U.S. national security.

Despite the program's successes, however, there is room for improvement:

- As the number of Fulbright alumni grows every year, the program must take care to **maintain these networks of exchange**. Since it is a government-run institution, the Fulbright program has a civic stake in tracking and connecting American participants it sends overseas when they return home. Alumni networks should be kept viable using new social media techniques so that participants can continue the Fulbright spirit of engagement in their countries of origin.
- As for current participants, the program would do well to streamline data collection techniques on trends in the changes and locations of Fulbrighters over time. A **cohesive body of data** on this subject is simply not accessible to the public.
- Congress should **continue to support the Fulbright program** and other like-minded educational institutions, both domestically and internationally, to maximize the global potential of the American student.
- Looking back on the stories of Abdullah and Shabnam from Afghanistan, the link between entrepreneurial enterprises in home countries and business development strategy in host countries forged by virtue of Fulbright binational partnerships cannot be underestimated. Further **links with entrepreneurial networks** should be explored.
- The Fulbright program could be **more accessible within the United States and throughout the world**. Most of the applications for each type of grant are internet based, which raises serious questions of fair and equal accessibility, especially for applicants in developing countries or impoverished contexts.
- Any discussion of international educational exchange is incomplete without considering the pressing need for **immigration reform**.

None of these steps are easy fixes— each will require deliberation and commitment to address and implement.

The returns from an investment in international academic exchanges have proven to be so beneficial and diverse in the history of the Fulbright program, that the practice of opening minds to the world should be considered worth the effort in terms of national security and public diplomacy.

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Building a New American Arsenal

The American Security Project (ASP) is a nonpartisan initiative to educate the American public about the changing nature of national security in the 21st century.

Gone are the days when a nation's strength could be measured by bombers and battleships. Security in this new era requires a New American Arsenal harnessing all of America's strengths: the force of our diplomacy; the might of our military; the vigor of our economy; and the power of our ideals.

We believe that America must lead other nations in the pursuit of our common goals and shared security. We must confront international challenges with all the tools at our disposal. We must address emerging problems before they become security crises. And to do this, we must forge a new bipartisan consensus at home.

ASP brings together prominent American leaders, current and former members of Congress, retired military officers, and former government officials. Staff direct research on a broad range of issues and engages and empowers the American public by taking its findings directly to them.

We live in a time when the threats to our security are as complex and diverse as terrorism, the spread of weapons of mass destruction, climate change, failed and failing states, disease, and pandemics. The same-old solutions and partisan bickering won't do. America needs an honest dialogue about security that is as robust as it is realistic.

ASP exists to promote that dialogue, to forge consensus, and to spur constructive action so that America meets the challenges to its security while seizing the opportunities the new century offers.



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