

Step up to a Fulbright

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Step up to a Fulbright

Maybe you are a junior faculty member, with only a few years' experience, and keen to develop your career through networking and international exchanges. Or maybe you are in mid-career, or even approaching retirement, and want to share some of your expertise with students and professionals in another country. Perhaps you want to learn new techniques from colleagues in another country, discover new research directions, gain new teaching insights, understand your discipline in a global context, establish long-term professional relationships, or allow your family to experience a different culture. No matter what stage you are at in your career, if you value professional and personal development, you should consider applying for a Fulbright grant.¹ Your College will love you for it too! (*Forbes Magazine*, in its ranking of colleges, "measures academic excellence in part by how many faculty members have won prestigious awards like Nobel prizes or MacArthur genius grants, as well as... Rhodes, Marshall, and Fulbright scholarships."²)

My own association with the Fulbright program is recent. After holding positions in half a dozen countries earlier in my career,³ I had spent the most recent ten years as a tenured professor at California State University, Channel Islands. This position allowed me to teach and conduct research in digital imaging and pattern recognition, and to write a textbook.⁴ I was enjoying teaching but was frustrated that I had insufficient time to commit to research. I longed for a period where I could devote more time to research and lay the foundation for some long-term collaborative projects, and I had earned the opportunity to take a sabbatical leave. It seemed a propitious time to investigate the Fulbright program.

THE FULBRIGHT PROGRAM

The Fulbright program is the flagship international educational exchange program sponsored by the U.S. government and administered by the Council for International Exchange of Scholars (CIES). It is designed to increase mutual understanding between the people of the United States and the people of other countries. The program provides participants, chosen for their academic merit and leadership potential, with the opportunity to study, teach, conduct research, exchange ideas, and contribute to finding solutions to shared international concerns. Grants are available for U.S. citizens to go abroad and for non-U.S. citizens to come to the United States.

The traditional Fulbright Scholar Program helps to send over 800 United States faculty members and professionals overseas every year and is active in more than 155 countries. It provides global opportunities^{5,6} across a wide range of disciplines, including the sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities. It is limited to U.S. citizens with a Ph.D. or an equivalent professional/terminal degree and either college or university teaching experience or recognized professional standing and substantial accomplishments (if outside academia). The program is very competitive and there are thousands of applicants every year. The core program comprises three types of award (Research, Teaching, and Research/

Teaching), for durations of 2–12 months. (There are also specialist program grants that range from 2 to 6 weeks.)

THE APPLICATION AND SELECTION PROCESS

Fulbright operates on a yearly application cycle, with details generally available in May and a deadline of August 1st for grants beginning the fall of the next year. There is a comprehensive web site,⁷ which allows you to search through the catalog of upcoming awards by discipline and/or by country. Some awards specify additional eligibility criteria, but for most teaching awards, proficiency in another language is not required. The web site includes guidelines for applying, FAQs, and tips.

The application is on-line, but the process is lengthy and rigorous and will require more than one sitting. You need to consider carefully your intentions, goals, future plans, and prospective projects. Before beginning the application you should already have a plan on where you want to go and why. Focus on what you plan to do, not on your biography. Why is your proposed project important? What will be its contribution to the host institution and country, to your home institution, and to your own professional development? The online application comprises background details, a project statement (which is crucial to your success), a short but focused CV, syllabi of courses (if a teaching award) or a bibliography (if a research award) or both (if a research/teaching award), three reference letters, and possibly an invitation letter. Collecting and checking all this information, and re-reading and improving your project statement, is best done over a timeline of a month or more.

Candidates are selected based on a variety of factors, including their professional qualifications and accomplishments, the merits and appropriateness/feasibility of the proposal, and (usually) some evidence of interest from the proposed host institution. Preference is generally given to candidates who have not had substantial recent experience abroad in the country to which they are applying. Personal qualities that are taken into account include collegiality, adaptability, and the ability to serve as a cultural ambassador, but there is no one single profile of a typical Fulbrighter. All Fulbrighters share a strong academic background, leadership potential, a passion for increasing mutual understanding among nations and cultures, and the flexibility to pursue their proposed project successfully.

The selection process is generally a bi-national collaborative process and comprises two stages. A panel of U.S. academics and professionals with regional experience will review the application first. Specialist reviewers will comment on those disciplines that are technically specialized. You are notified whether or not your application has been recommended for further consideration in the host country by about November. Recommended applications are then forwarded to the host country and the Fulbright Foreign Scholarship Board for final selection and approval, and you are notified around March whether you have been selected to receive an award. That usually gives you a few months to

complete further paperwork, get a medical examination and obtain visas, open a bank account in the host country, and prepare for your travel.

The Fulbright grant itself comprises funds for travel, a monthly stipend, and various other allowances, which differ depending on the country to be visited. Fulbright stipends are not intended to approach salaries. Generally speaking, they are budgeted to cover living expenses in the host country for the grantee and accompanying dependents and are usually sufficient to support a reasonable lifestyle. Because of continuing financial obligations at home, however, it is best to try and coordinate your Fulbright award with a sabbatical leave.

THE FULBRIGHT EXPERIENCE

I held a Fulbright Senior Scholar research/teaching award in Brisbane for 6 months, and was accompanied by my wife (for whom there was a dependant's allowance) and two of my adult children (no allowance, since they were over 21). Of course Australia is a developed country, with a similar standard of living to our own, and few (!) language differences; other countries will have their own specific challenges. I had spent a year at Monash University some 25 yr previously, and we had visited the country subsequently for a holiday, so we were familiar with the lifestyle and the idiosyncrasies. Indeed it was my supervisor from 25 yr previously who introduced me to my new collaborator at QUT (Queensland University of Technology) in Brisbane. We corresponded via e-mail for several months, crafting a suitable project.

My research project explored diffusion tensor imaging of articular cartilage, and the associated teaching involved teaching medical imaging. The Executive Director of QUT's research institute, the Institute of Health and Biomedical Innovation (IHBI), invited me to collaborate on several additional projects as a Visiting Researcher. Of course I was ecstatic (though my family was less so, since it would eat into my leisure time). IHBI provided an (additional) office for 3 days per week, and I worked on several projects and presented a number of research seminars for them.

Fulbright encourages and funds travel to other institutions within the country and in neighboring countries. I was able to meet and discuss research projects with several scientists at the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation, Australia's national science agency. I also had the opportunity to travel to New Zealand and Malaysia. In New Zealand, I presented a keynote address at the Image and Vision Computing New Zealand conference in Wellington and met with several research groups at local universities. In

Malaysia, I gave a number of presentations at various universities and advised on curricular development and research. Subsequently, I was invited to serve on two Ph.D. dissertation committees. All of these organizations and institutions were extremely enthusiastic about hosting a Fulbright scholar, reminding me of the biblical verse about getting respect everywhere but in one's own home town!⁸

THE AFTERMATH

Becoming a Fulbrighter is a transformative experience. Most Fulbrighters find it to be one of the most rewarding and satisfying adventures of their career. It allows you to take chances professionally, doing work that you would not be able to do in the normal course of events. You make many new friends and professional contacts, and it inevitably proves to be a highly productive period in your career. In my case, it led to two publications and an edited research book.

After completing a Fulbright, there are opportunities to stay involved and further develop one's career through the various alumni communities. You will also have lifelong access to an online Resource Center, which includes more than 20,000 scholarly journals. As they told us at our orientation, "Once a Fulbrighter, always a Fulbrighter."

As a footnote, you generally cannot apply for another Fulbright award for 5 yr after completion, and you can hold only a maximum of two in a lifetime, although sometimes there are waivers on these conditions. My experience was so positive that I'm taking advantage of one of these waivers and applying for a teaching award to Indonesia, to compare the learning approaches of Indonesian students with their U.S. counterparts. You can't have too much of a good thing (as Shakespeare's Rosalind certainly suspected)!⁹

¹S. H. Cobb, "Consider a Fulbright," *Phys. Teach.* **34**(8), 502–503 (1996).

²H. R. Alberts, "America's best colleges (No, not that list)," *Forbes* **182**(3), 46 (2008).

³G. Dougherty, "Have physics, will travel," *Phys. Bull.* **37**, 335–336 (1986).

⁴G. Dougherty, *Digital Image Processing for Medical Applications* (Cambridge U.P., Cambridge, England, 2009).

⁵R. Cottrell, "Fulbright programs: An opportunity for career development," *Health Promot. Pract.* **13**(1), 14–17 (2012).

⁶M. T. Farris, D. Menachof, and M. Crum, "Global opportunities via the Fulbright Scholar Program," *Transp. J.* **49**(2), 66–78 (2010).

⁷The Core Fulbright Scholar Program, <http://www.cies.org/us_scholars/us_awards/>.

⁸Matthew 13:57 and Mark 6:4.

⁹William Shakespeare, *As You Like it*, Act IV, Scene I (1600).

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