

ASCO News

International Cooperation through the Fulbright Scholars Program

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On September 27, 1945, Senator James William Fulbright, the junior senator from Arkansas, rose to the Senate floor to introduce a bill. This bill would authorize the use of funds from war surplus sales to finance a program “for the promotion of international good will through the exchange of students in the fields of education, culture, and science.” Within 6 weeks, the Senate unanimously approved the law without debate and the House of Representatives followed by doing the same.¹

Fulbright had already introduced similar resolutions urging international understanding. In early 1945, he had created a bipartisan joint resolution aimed at advocating for American international involvement. The resolution also encouraged participation in an office of international educational exchange. Although the United States had been involved in different educational exchanges after the Boxer Rebellion and World War I, the Second World War would spur the creation and expansion of these innovations. Beginning in 1938, the State Department created a Cultural Relations Division to Latin America in an effort to provide scholarships between universities and undo the influence of fascist states in South America. These sorts of programs were continued in different forms as part of the US occupation of Japan, Germany and Austria. In this vein, Senator Fulbright found World War II to be a watershed moment in pushing for international educational exchanges. Such a devastating war demanded that the nations of the world strive for a “creative peace.”² In Fulbright’s view, the aim of educational exchanges were not merely for sharing information. “They are concerned in part with increasing man’s knowledge of science and the arts,” Fulbright would later write, “But they are primarily concerned with increasing man’s understanding of himself and of the national and world societies in which he lives.”³ Only cultivating this sort of international understanding could invent the “creative peace” Fulbright sought after the World War II.

The initial legislation was passed as amendments to the 1944 Surplus Property Act clarifying a new program that would use the sales of surplus war material. Senator Fulbright introduced a second piece of legislation in November 1945. The Fulbright Act would be passed in 1947 and expanded by the Fulbright-Hays Mutual Educational and Cultural Exchange Act in 1961.⁴ In 1948, 65 scholars from the US ventured overseas, but within 20 years, over 82,000 individuals would receive Fulbright fellowships as part of bilateral commissions between the US and 110 countries.¹

The program has expanded and evolved since its first participants went abroad in 1948, and now provides funds for scholars, professionals, and students to teach and conduct research abroad. Selection for becoming a Fulbright Scholar is highly competitive as the program has a solid reputation for excellence and has been described as “a centerpiece in American engagement around the world.”⁵ However, numerous professionals have found it to be a way to enhance their skills while sharing their knowledge with others.

Today, the Fulbright program operates in over 160 countries in every part of the world to promote educational exchanges. The Fulbright program has awarded 400,000 participants with their merit-based grants, and it continues to provide approximately 8,000 grants annually through a number of programs. These grants are awarded to students, scholars, teachers, and professionals in different specialized programs. The Fulbright US Student Program provides the opportunity for college seniors, graduate

students, and young professionals to travel abroad to research topics in their field or teach English. The Fulbright US Scholar Program provides opportunities for faculty, professionals, and artists to research or lecture abroad at foreign institutions for up to a year. Other scholars might pursue the Specialist Program which provides funds for US professionals to consult on curricula or different university planning projects. There are over a dozen other types of scholarship for scholars, students, and professionals within the US and around the world.⁶ All of these programs are administered by the United States Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs. In addition to funding from the US Congress, the individual programs are also subsidized with contributions from the partner country in the specific binational commission. Other funds can come from public and private donations, contributions from partnering universities, or other government agencies like USAID.⁷

These programs also work closely with US embassies in host countries and the binational Fulbright commissions. These commissions work with a board consisting of commissioners both from the US and the participating country. They are the ones responsible for developing programming priorities, fundraising, recruiting Fulbright fellows, and implementing the actual exchanges. In countries where binational commissions have not been formed, the US Embassy for the participating country and its Public Affairs Section work to develop the fundraising and programming for Fulbright fellows instead.⁷

Applicants for a Fulbright fellowship in the US first must reach out to their college, university, or cooperating agency. This group then reviews the application to pass along approved candidates to the Fulbright Commission or US embassy for the country to which they are applying. Individuals applying from outside of the US can apply directly to the binational Fulbright commission or US embassy in their country. The final selection is sent to the J. William Fulbright Foreign Scholarship Board whose board members make the determinations from the lists of recommended candidates. Different grants pursued by applicants will affect the placement of candidates.

The Fulbright program offers professionals the opportunity to teach or conduct research at an institution in another country. For optometrists in the US, the two most likely avenues for participating in the Fulbright program are through a Core Award or a Fulbright Specialist grant. The Core Fulbright awards are for either 4 months or 8 months, while the Fulbright specialist grants usually have a time frame of 2 to 6 weeks. These programs are done through cooperation between the US Fulbright Commission and a Fulbright Commission in the other country. Depending on the country, there may be other programs that are available as well. Many countries, through their Fulbright Commission, also offer opportunities for citizens of their country to come to the US and participate in educational programs or research projects.

An Example of a Core Award

The Core program only allows applications once per year, typically in late summer or early fall. With only 800 of these awarded per year across all countries and disciplines, it is a longer application process and results in an award that may run four months or eight months. In applying for this an individual must determine to which country they wish to apply in advance and describe a project they will undertake. They will also need to submit a CV and a list of references that can verify their ability to undertake the endeavor. After months of review a person is usually notified of their status in November. If the initial review is positive, they will go on to a second phase and another review with individuals from the Fulbright Commission in the host country. After that round of interviews, they will be informed as to whether their project was accepted or not. This grant provides an allowance toward air travel and a modest monthly stipend. The host institution may or may not provide housing for this longer term.

Opportunities for participating in a Fulbright scholar program require a fit between the needs of the host country and institution and the US scholar. There are many countries for which an exchange as an optometrist may not be possible due to the types of expertise they are prioritizing for their program. It is also beneficial to understand to some degree the scope of practice of the profession and its fit within the

healthcare system in that country. To maximize the experience, the US scholar should have a professional relationship with their counterparts at the host institution.

The US Scholar Experience in the Core Award

In this particular case, both parties first met while attending a World Council of Optometry meeting. Between sessions and at social functions conversations developed around the possibilities of a visiting faculty coming to the institution. As the conversation progressed, we determined that there was good overlap between the topics in the curriculum at the Pozna? University of Medical Sciences that would benefit from the support and expertise of the visiting faculty. Over the course of a week, the plan for a proposal was put together and next steps assigned.

After being notified of the award, plans were made for the experience of being a visiting scholar for an entire semester. Correspondence with the host clarified the responsibilities for the time and discussed the necessities of daily living that would be required to move a US scholar and his family. The Fulbright orientation was a ten-day program which fortunately that year was scheduled to occur in Pozna?, the same city in which we would later be living. Attending this was valuable to not only meet other Fulbright participants but also to gain a better understanding of Polish culture, language, and tradition. As it was in the same city in which we were going to spend time, it was also helpful to gain some perspective on geography and sights within the city. This orientation visit also offered the opportunity to go to the department and meet with the Polish faculty who would become colleagues.

On a regular basis professional responsibilities involved teaching in the clinical procedures lectures and labs, teaching in the case analysis course, and assisting with patient care in the school clinic. There were times over the course of the semester that continuing education lectures were provided to practitioners either through the university or through the professional association related to clinical optometry. These interactions with students and practitioners allowed for building long term professional relationships as well as friendships. Over the years there have been opportunities to return and lecture to the profession as well as opportunities to collaborate on projects from a distance. For the US scholar it demonstrated different approaches to the subject matter and broadened his perspective on optometric education.

The Host Institution Experience

Our first meeting in Orlando during a World Council of Optometry meeting in 2004 not only served to establish our mutual interest concerning the development of Polish optometry but also served to establish a personal rapport. This was the beginning of a friendship and understanding that allowed for ease of cooperation on projects to come.

The Department of Optometry and Biology of Visual System at Karol Marcinkowski University in Pozna? has been cooperating with optometrists and colleges of optometry in the US for over 30 years. Previous exchanges of a few days had taken place between American and Polish optometrists. Lectures by outstanding optometrists such as professors H. Hofstetter, S. Baldwin, G. Lowther or W.C. Maples, as well as considerable financial help from the American side at building the Center of Optometry in Poznan were all great results of that Polish-American cooperation⁸.

While there had been short visits from US optometrists over the years, the visit of the US Fulbright scholar was the first long term stay which demanded more involved logistical preparation for living arrangements as well as preparation on how to best integrate him into the academic program. Ongoing conversations to maximize the value of the exchange were conducted and a plan of activities agreed upon. These included:

- participation in lectures/seminars/labs on optometry for students

- seminars on selected issues/problems in clinical optometry for the optometry faculty in the department
- discussions on the current educational program and its possible modifications; also improvements in the postgraduate program in optometry
- participation in scientific and professional meetings, delivering lectures for The Polish Association of Optometry and Optics
- meeting with authorities of the University (Dean of the Medical Faculty, President of the University)

During the winter semester in Poznań, the US scholar was able to participate in all of the above activities. An excellent rapport was developed with both the students and faculty in the department. With the visit of the US scholar, we had the opportunity to not only to become acquainted with methods of teaching optometry which were in use in the US but also to benefit from the scholar's erudition. Thanks to this visit and participation in the activities in our optometry department, ongoing scientific and didactic cooperation was established.

The results of discussion on teaching programs for optometrists resulted in a joint poster presentation which took place at World Council of Optometry meeting in London, 2008⁹. Another outcome was the modification of the postgraduate teaching program as was discussed at the World Council of Optometry meeting in Durban, South Africa in 2010¹⁰. Further expression of that joint cooperation was the scholar's participation in "Optometry 2010" and "Optometry 2011" – international conferences which were organized by our university where the US professor returned to deliver some lectures. There was also a visit to the Department in 2014 to deliver two lectures for students and faculty regarding "The Model of Optometry Practice in the US" and "Screening Methods for Evaluation of Vision Currently Used in the US".

The visit of the US Fulbright scholar in Poznań was a great success. For his contributions to the development of Polish optometry, the US scholar was honored by the host institution and the Department of Optometry and Biology of the Visual System with the Witelo Medal. Furthermore, it laid the foundations for a future visit at our university in the following academic year by Professor J. Pizzimenti who arrived in Poznań on a long term WCO Fellowship.

Overall, the Fulbright exchange was of great benefit to the US scholar as well as the host institution. Both were able to learn a great deal from each other and to better understand the approach to the profession of optometry in the two different countries. It also built connections that have thrived for years and resulted in modifications to curriculum and ongoing collaborations. This exchange certainly lived up to Senator Fulbright's dream of "increasing man's understanding of himself and of the national and world societies in which he lives."³

An Example of a Fulbright Specialist Award

To participate in the Fulbright Specialist program a person needs to apply and be placed on the Fulbright Specialist panel. In doing so they will be required to complete an application, submit a CV, and have references that can verify their abilities. The application then undergoes review, and if successful, the applicant is notified that they have been put on the Fulbright specialist panel for a 3-year time frame. Once on that panel, the person can then review opportunities to share their expertise with projects in other countries. As there are a wide range of subject areas, it may take some time before a project gets listed that is aligned with a specific area of expertise. Once a person on the panel sees a project that interests them, they may apply through the Fulbright Specialist portal for that specific project. The application will go through another series of reviews to determine which of the individuals, having expressed an interest in that area, is the best fit. Once a person is selected, individuals from the Fulbright Commission will work with them to ensure their travel arrangements and documents are all in

place. The host party will provide lodging. The grant will cover the cost of coach air travel and provide a modest daily salary.

The US Specialist Experience

After being named to the Fulbright specialist panel, opportunities would be reviewed on a regular basis as they became available. One such opportunity was to spend 2 weeks at the University of the Cape Coast in Ghana consulting with their Optometry Department. Before the actual visit, a conference was held remotely to review the expectations of the project and ensure the maximum benefit from the time in country. Background materials were received and reviewed and additional background material that might be relevant was obtained. The Department wanted to bring in someone with an outside perspective to review their curriculum, discuss creating a graduate program, and learn more about optometric education in the United States. With the duration of this program being shorter, the orientation was completed in one half day at the US Embassy in Accra. The Specialist then traveled to the seaside city of Cape Coast.

During the time in Cape Coast, the Specialist participated in activities with faculty and students, presented lectures to the multiple audiences, engaged in a review of the current curriculum and proposals being considered for moving into the future, while he also learned more about the people of Ghana and their culture. He was able to tour the educational facilities, visit off campus and on campus clinical sites, and meet with university officials as well as visit historic sites and nature preserves. This comprehensive experience provided a solid perspective on how optometric education in Ghana compared with that in the US. These interactions led to ongoing collaborations in numerous areas and built ties with optometric organizations in the US as well as leading to a sister school agreement between the University of the Cape Coast and a United States School of Optometry.

The Host Institution Specialist Experience

The Department of Optometry and Vision Science at the University of Cape Coast (UCC) was established in 2002 and runs the 6-year Doctor of Optometry (OD) program. There are currently 11 full time academic staff and of this number, 10 are products of the UCC OD program who have obtained postgraduate training from UK, South Africa, China, Hong Kong and Ghana. There are other part-time and cognate faculty who are not optometrists as well as other optometrists who are based in the clinics who attend to patients and assist in the clinical training of students. Having existed for 2 decades, the department has matured to run postgraduate programs in Clinical Optometry and Vision Science. As a citadel of research in the African subregion, the Department, having applied to the US Embassy to for a Fulbright's specialist with the view of bringing international perspective from the US to our developed curricula, was glad to be connected to the US Specialist by the US Embassy in Ghana. The virtual meetings held in advance of the visit with the scholar enabled us to share our expectations and gauge and contextualize his expectations. Both parties also agreed on a program for the short stay in conjunction with the US Embassy in Ghana. Since this was a short stay, the developed curricula (MSc/MPhil/PhD in Clinical Optometry as well as Vision Science) and the existing OD curriculum were all sent via email to the Specialist for his review prior to arrival in Ghana. The University of Cape Coast as per the agreement, provided accommodation and other logistics such as airport pickup and drop off, internal transportation among others, to ensure a smooth stay in Cape Coast. Our experience with the Specialist was phenomenal as he gave lectures to both students and faculty in the Department as well as the School of Allied Health Sciences which had an external audience from outside optometry. His perspectives on the large similarities between the optometry program (OD) run in Ghana and that of the US was reassuring to the team in Ghana. Similarly, the content of the postgraduate curriculum was at par to that of international standards and was cleared for accreditation by the relevant regulatory bodies in Ghana. Although the specialist had a short stay, UCC ensured that he visited the great historic sites such as the Cape Coast and Elmina slave castles and the Kakum Rain Forest Canopy walk, among

others.

Following the visit by the specialist, there have been several engagements which have led to the reestablishment of the link between the Department and Volunteer Optometric Services to Humanity (VOSH), a new link to Association of Schools and Colleges of Optometry (ASCO) and a formal agreement between the Department in Ghana and another institution in the US. Other faculty in the US have also expressed their desire to lecture in the program in Ghana virtually and provide avenues for virtual learning by students in Ghana particularly in clinical practice. It is expected that the relationship will lead to more Fulbright specialists visiting the Department of Optometry and Vision Science at Cape Coast and lead to further educational exchanges and joint publications.

In each of these cases, the individual conversations between the Fulbright scholar and the faculty, administration, and students in the program are fulfilling for all parties as they learn new approaches and enhance cultural understanding. The recent Summit on Optometric Education showed an interest from all countries for improving the cultural competency of optometrists.¹¹ The Fulbright programs offer another avenue for expanding the worldview of the scholar as well as those at the host institution. The Fulbright program currently also offers six different programs for students or professionals to come to the US.⁶

Each of these programs offers professionals the opportunity for career and personal growth which will reward them, their patients, and their profession for years. It also offers the host institution the opportunity to infuse an outside perspective into their program and build bridges that will help them well into the future. The communication between the scholar and the host institution continues beyond the length of the visit as a conversation between friends.

Anyone interested in pursuing a Fulbright Specialist opportunity can obtain more information from World Learning <https://worldlearning-community.force.com> while more information on the Core Awards and other Fulbright programs can be found at <https://us.fulbrightonline.org> It is important to verify the needs of the programs and the deadlines well in advance as there are adjustments made to the programs and the process every year. With over 160 countries participating in the Fulbright program, it is important to remember that the requirements for participation vary by country and by project. Some may require proficiency in another language, a specific academic credential, or other considerations.

The authors have no conflict of interest with any of the programs mentioned and are not compensated for this article.

EDITOR'S NOTE: This article was submitted before any funding changes were made to US federal programs. Please consult the appropriate office for questions on these or any other federal programs.

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